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Browning and Tennyson

ENGLISH MEN OF LETTERS

ROBERT BROWNING

BY

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ROBERT BROWNING

CHAPTER I

BROWNING IN EARLY LIFE

ON the subject of Browning's work innumerable things have been said and remain to be said; of his life, considered as a narrative of facts, there is little or nothing to say. It was a lucid and public and yet quiet life, which culminated in one great dramatic test of character, and then fell back again into this union of quietude and publicity. And yet, in spite of this, it is a great deal more difficult to speak finally about his life than about his work. His work has the mystery which belongs to the complex; his life the much greater mystery which belongs to the simple. He was clever enough to understand his own poetry; and if he understood it, we can understand it. But he was also entirely unconscious and impulsive, and he was never clever enough to understand his own character; consequently we may be excused if that part of him which was hidden from him is partly hidden from us. The subtle man is always immeasurably easier to understand than the natural man; for the subtle man keeps a diary of his moods, he practises the art of self-analysis and self-revelation, and can tell us how he came to feel this

or to say that. But a man like Browning knows no more about the state of his emotions than about the state of his pulse; they are things greater than he, things growing at will, like forces of Nature. There is an old anecdote, probably apocryphal, which describes how a feminine admirer wrote to Browning asking him for the meaning of one of his darker poems, and received the following reply: "When that poem was written, two people knew what it meant — God and Robert Browning. And now God only knows what it means." This story gives, in all probability, an entirely false impression of Browning's attitude towards his work. He was a keen artist, a keen scholar, he could put his finger on anything, and he had a memory like the British Museum Library. But the story does, in all probability, give a tolerably accurate picture of Browning's attitude towards his own emotions and his psychological type. If a man had asked him what some particular allusion to a Persian hero meant he could in all probability have quoted half the epic; if a man had asked him which third cousin of Charlemagne was alluded to in *Sordello*, he could have given an account of the man and an account of his father and his grandfather. But if a man had asked him what he thought of himself, or what were his emotions an hour before his wedding, he would have replied with perfect sincerity that God alone knew.

This mystery of the unconscious man, far deeper than any mystery of the conscious one, existing as it does in all men, existed peculiarly in Browning, because he was a very ordinary and spontaneous man. The same thing exists to some extent in all history and all affairs. Anything that is deliberate, twisted, created

as a trap and a mystery, must be discovered at last; everything that is done naturally remains mysterious. It may be difficult to discover the principles of the Rosierucians, but it is much easier to discover the principles of the Rosierucians than the principles of the United States: nor has any secret society kept its aims so quiet as humanity. The way to be inexplicable is to be chaotic, and on the surface this was the quality of Browning's life; there is the same difference between judging of his poetry and judging of his life, that there is between making a map of a labyrinth and making a map of a mist. The discussion of what some particular allusion in *Sordello* means has gone on so far, and may go on still, but it has it in its nature to end. The life of Robert Browning, who combines the greatest brain with the most simple temperament known in our annals, would go on for ever if we did not decide to summarise it in a very brief and simple narrative.

Robert Browning was born in Camberwell on May 7th, 1812. His father and grandfather had been clerks in the Bank of England, and his whole family would appear to have belonged to the solid and educated middle class — the class which is interested in letters, but not ambitious in them, the class to which poetry is a luxury, but not a necessity.

This actual quality and character of the Browning family shows some tendency to be obscured by matters more remote. It is the custom of all biographers to seek for the earliest traces of a family in distant ages and even in distant lands; and Browning, as it happens, has given them opportunities which tend to lead away the mind from the main matter in hand. There is a

tradition, for example, that men of his name were prominent in the feudal ages; it is based upon little beyond a coincidence of surnames and the fact that Browning used a seal with a coat-of-arms. Thousands of middle-class men use such a seal, merely because it is a curiosity or a legacy, without knowing or caring anything about the condition of their ancestors in the Middle Ages. Then, again, there is a theory that he was of Jewish blood; a view which is perfectly conceivable, and which Browning would have been the last to have thought derogatory, but for which, as a matter of fact, there is exceedingly little evidence. The chief reason assigned by his contemporaries for the belief was the fact that he was, without doubt, specially and profoundly interested in Jewish matters. This suggestion, worthless in any case, would, if anything, tell the other way. For while an Englishman may be enthusiastic about England, or indignant against England, it never occurred to any living Englishman to be interested in England. Browning was, like every other intelligent Aryan, interested in the Jews; but if he was related to every people in which he was interested, he must have been of extraordinarily mixed extraction. Thirdly, there is the yet more sensational theory that there was in Robert Browning a strain of the negro. The supporters of this hypothesis seem to have little in reality to say, except that Browning's grandmother was certainly a Creole. It is said in support of the view that Browning was singularly dark in early life, and was often mistaken for an Italian. There does not, however, seem to be anything particular to be deduced from this, except that if he looked like an Italian, he must have looked exceedingly unlike a negro.

There is nothing valid against any of these three theories, just as there is nothing valid in their favour; they may, any or all of them, be true, but they are still irrelevant. They are something that is in history or biography a great deal worse than being false — they are misleading. We do not want to know about a man like Browning, whether he had a right to a shield used in the Wars of the Roses, or whether the tenth grandfather of his Creole grandmother had been white or black: we want to know something about his family, which is quite a different thing. We wish to have about Browning not so much the kind of information which would satisfy Clarenceux King-at-Arms, but the sort of information which would satisfy us, if we were advertising for a very confidential secretary, or a very private tutor. We should not be concerned as to whether the tutor were descended from an Irish king, but we should still be really concerned about his extraction, about what manner of people his had been for the last two or three generations. This is the most practical duty of biography, and this is also the most difficult. It is a great deal easier to hunt a family from tombstone to tombstone back to the time of Henry II. than to catch and realise and put upon paper that most nameless and elusive of all things — social tone.

It will be said immediately, and must as promptly be admitted, that we could find a biographical significance in any of these theories if we looked for it. But it is, indeed, the sin and snare of biographers that they tend to see significance in everything; characteristic carelessness if their hero drops his pipe, and characteristic carefulness if he picks it up again. It is true, assuredly, that all the three races above named could be

connected with Browning's personality. If we believed, for instance, that he really came of a race of mediæval barons, we should say at once that from them he got his pre-eminent spirit of battle: we should be right, for every line in his stubborn soul and his erect body did really express the fighter; he was always contending, whether it was with a German theory about the Gnostics, or with a stranger who elbowed his wife in a crowd. Again, if we had decided that he was a Jew, we should point out how absorbed he was in the terrible simplicity of monotheism: we should be right, for he was so absorbed. Or again, in the case even of the negro fancy; it would not be difficult for us to suggest a love of colour, a certain mental gaudiness, a pleasure

“When reds and blues were indeed red and blue,”

as he says in *The Ring and the Book*. We should be right; for there really was in Browning a tropical violence of taste, an artistic scheme compounded as it were, of orchids and cockatoos, which, amid our cold English poets, seems scarcely European. All this is extremely fascinating; and it may be true. But, as has above been suggested, here comes in the great temptation of this kind of work, the noble temptation to see too much in everything. The biographer can easily see a personal significance in these three hypothetical nationalities. But is there in the world a biographer who could lay his hand upon his heart and say that he would not have seen as much significance in any three other nationalities? If Browning's ancestors had been Frenchmen, should we not have said that it was from them doubtless that he inherited that logical agility

which marks him among English poets? If his grandfather had been a Swede, should we not have said that the old sea-roving blood broke out in bold speculation and insatiable travel? If his great-aunt had been a Red Indian, should we not have said that only in the Ojibways and the Blackfeet do we find the Browning fantasticality combined with the Browning stoicism? This over-readiness to seize hints is an inevitable part of that secret hero-worship which is the heart of biography. The lover of great men sees signs of them long before they begin to appear on the earth, and, like some old mythological chronicler, claims as their heralds the storms and the falling stars.

A certain indulgence must therefore be extended to the present writer if he declines to follow that admirable veteran of Browning study, Dr. Furnivall, into the prodigious investigations which he has been conducting into the condition of the Browning family since the beginning of the world. For his last discovery, the descent of Browning from a footman in the service of a country magnate, there seems to be suggestive, though not decisive, evidence. But Browning's descent from barons, or Jews, or lackeys, or black men, is not the main point touching his family. If the Brownings were of mixed origin, they were so much the more like the great majority of English middle-class people. It is curious that the romance of race should be spoken of as if it were a thing peculiarly aristocratic; that admiration for rank, or interest in family, should mean only interest in one not very interesting type of rank and family. The truth is that aristocrats exhibit less of the romance of pedigree than any other people in the world. For since it is their principle to marry only within their

own class and mode of life, there is no opportunity in their case for any of the more interesting studies in heredity; they exhibit almost the unbroken uniformity of the lower animals. It is in the middle classes that we find the poetry of genealogy; it is the suburban grocer standing at his shop door whom some wild dash of Eastern or Celtic blood may drive suddenly to a whole holiday or a crime. Let us admit then, that it is true that these legends of the Browning family have every abstract possibility. But it is a far more cogent and apposite truth that if a man had knocked at the door of every house in the street where Browning was born, he would have found similar legends in all of them. There is hardly a family in Camberwell that has not a story or two about foreign marriages a few generations back; and in all this the Brownings are simply a typical Camberwell family. The real truth about Browning and men like him can scarcely be better expressed than in the words of that very wise and witty story, Kingsley's *Water Babies*, in which the pedigree of the Professor is treated in a manner which is an excellent example of the wild common sense of the book. "His mother was a Dutch woman, and therefore she was born at Curaçoa (of course, you have read your geography and therefore know why), and his father was a Pole, and therefore he was brought up at Petropaulowski (of course, you have learnt your modern politics, and therefore know why), but for all that he was as thorough an Englishman as ever coveted his neighbour's goods."

It may be well therefore to abandon the task of obtaining a clear account of Browning's family, and endeavour to obtain, what is much more important, a

clear account of his home. For the great central and solid fact, which these heraldic speculations tend inevitably to veil and confuse, is that Browning was a thoroughly typical Englishman of the middle class. He may have had alien blood, and that alien blood, by the paradox we have observed, may have made him more characteristically a native. A phase, a fancy, a metaphor may or may not have been born of eastern or southern elements, but he was, without any question at all, an Englishman of the middle class. Neither all his liberality nor all his learning ever made him anything but an Englishman of the middle class. He expanded his intellectual tolerance until it included the anarchism of *Fifine at the Fair* and the blasphemous theology of Caliban; but he remained himself an Englishman of the middle class. He pictured all the passions of the earth since the Fall, from the devouring amorousness of *Time's Revenges* to the despotic fantasy of *Instans Tyrannus*; but he remained himself an Englishman of the middle class. The moment that he came in contact with anything that was slovenly, anything that was lawless, in actual life, something rose up in him, older than any opinions, the blood of generations of good men. He met George Sand and her poetical circle and hated it, with all the hatred of an old city merchant for the irresponsible life. He met the Spiritualists and hated them, with all the hatred of the middle class for borderlands and equivocal positions and playing with fire. His intellect went upon bewildering voyages, but his soul walked in a straight road. He piled up the fantastic towers of his imagination until they eclipsed the planets; but the plan of the foundation on which he built was

always the plan of an honest English house in Camberwell. He abandoned, with a ceaseless intellectual ambition, every one of the convictions of his class; but he carried its prejudices into eternity.

It is then of Browning as a member of the middle class, that we can speak with the greatest historical certainty; and it is his immediate forebears who present the real interest to us. His father, Robert Browning, was a man of great delicacy of taste, and to all appearance of an almost exaggerated delicacy of conscience. Every glimpse we have of him suggests that earnest and almost worried kindness which is the mark of those to whom selfishness, even justifiable selfishness, is really a thing difficult or impossible. In early life Robert Browning senior was placed by his father (who was apparently a father of a somewhat primitive, not to say barbaric, type) in an important commercial position in the West Indies. He threw up the position however, because it involved him in some recognition of slavery. Whereupon his unique parent, in a transport of rage, not only disinherited him and flung him out of doors, but by a superb stroke of humour, which stands alone in the records of parental ingenuity, sent him in a bill for the cost of his education. About the same time that he was suffering for his moral sensibility he was also disturbed about religious matters, and he completed his severance from his father by joining a dissenting sect. He was, in short, a very typical example of the serious middle-class man of the Wilberforce period, a man to whom duty was all in all, and who would revolutionise an empire or a continent for the satisfaction of a single moral scruple. Thus, while he was Puritan at the core, not the ruthless Puritan of the seventeenth.

but the humanitarian Puritan of the eighteenth century, he had upon the surface all the tastes and graces of a man of culture. Numerous accomplishments of the lighter kind, such as drawing and painting in water colours, he possessed; and his feeling for many kinds of literature was fastidious and exact. But the whole was absolutely redolent of the polite severity of the eighteenth century. He lamented his son's early admiration for Byron, and never ceased adjuring him to model himself upon Pope.

He was, in short, one of the old-fashioned humanitarians of the eighteenth century, a class which we may or may not have conquered in moral theory, but which we most certainly have not conquered in moral practice. Robert Browning senior destroyed all his fortunes in order to protest against black slavery; white slavery may be, as later economists tell us, a thing infinitely worse, but not many men destroy their fortunes in order to protest against it. The ideals of the men of that period appear to us very unattractive; to them duty was a kind of chilly sentiment. But when we think what they did with those cold ideals, we can scarcely feel so superior. They uprooted the enormous Upas of slavery, the tree that was literally as old as the race of man. They altered the whole face of Europe with their deductive fancies. We have ideals that are really better, ideals of passion, of mysticism, of a sense of the youth and adventurousness of the earth; but it will be well for us if we achieve as much by our frenzy as they did by their delicacies. It scarcely seems as if we were as robust in our very robustness as they were robust in their sensibility.

Robert Browning's mother was the daughter of

William Wiedermann, a German merchant settled in Dundee, and married to a Scotch wife. One of the poet's principal biographers has suggested that from this union of the German and Scotch, Browning got his metaphysical tendency; it is possible; but here again we must beware of the great biographical danger of making mountains out of molehills. What Browning's mother unquestionably did give to him, was in the way of training — a very strong religious habit, and a great belief in manners. Thomas Carlyle called her "the type of a Scottish gentlewoman," and the phrase has a very real significance to those who realise the peculiar condition of Scotland, one of the very few European countries where large sections of the aristocracy are Puritans; thus a Scottish gentlewoman combines two descriptions of dignity at the same time. Little more is known of this lady except the fact that after her death Browning could not bear to look at places where she had walked.

Browning's education in the formal sense reduces itself to a minimum. In very early boyhood he attended a species of dame-school, which, according to some of his biographers, he had apparently to leave because he was too clever to be tolerable. However this may be, he undoubtedly went afterwards to a school kept by Mr. Ready, at which again he was marked chiefly by precocity. But the boy's education did not in truth take place at any systematic seat of education; it took place in his own home, where one of the quaintest and most learned and most absurdly indulgent of fathers poured out in an endless stream fantastic recitals from the Greek epics and mediæval chronicles. If we test the matter by the test of actual schools and

universities, Browning will appear to be almost the least educated man in English literary history. But if we test it by the amount actually learned, we shall think that he was perhaps the most educated man that ever lived; that he was in fact, if anything, over-educated. In a spirited poem he has himself described how, when he was a small child, his father used to pile up chairs in the drawing-room and call them the city of Troy. Browning came out of the home crammed with all kinds of knowledge—knowledge about the Greek poets, knowledge about the Provençal Troubadours, knowledge about the Jewish Rabbis of the Middle Ages. But along with all this knowledge he carried one definite and important piece of ignorance, an ignorance of the degree to which such knowledge was exceptional. He was no spoilt and self-conscious child, taught to regard himself as clever. In the atmosphere in which he lived learning was a pleasure, and a natural pleasure, like sport or wine. He had in it the pleasure of some old scholar of the Renaissance, when grammar itself was as fresh as the flowers of spring. He had no reason to suppose that every one did not join in so admirable a game. His sagacious destiny, while giving him knowledge of everything else, left him in ignorance of the ignorance of the world.

Of his boyish days scarcely any important trace remains, except a kind of diary which contains under one date the laconic statement, "Married two wives this morning." The insane ingenuity of the biographer would be quite capable of seeing in this a most suggestive foreshadowing of the sexual dualism which is so ably defended in *Fifine at the Fair*. A great part of his childhood was passed in the society of his only

sister Sariana; and it is a curious and touching fact that with her also he passed his last days. From his earliest babyhood he seems to have lived in a more or less stimulating mental atmosphere; but as he emerged into youth he came under great poetic influences, which made his father's classical poetic tradition look for the time insipid: Browning began to live in the life of his own age.

As a young man he attended classes at University College; beyond this there is little evidence that he was much in touch with intellectual circles outside that of his own family. But the forces that were moving the literary world had long passed beyond the merely literary area. About the time of Browning's boyhood a very subtle and profound change was beginning in the intellectual atmosphere of such homes as that of the Brownings. In studying the careers of great men we tend constantly to forget that their youth was generally passed and their characters practically formed in a period long previous to their appearance in history. We think of Milton, the Restoration Puritan, and forget that he grew up in the living shadow of Shakespeare and the full summer of the Elizabethan drama. We realise Garibaldi as a sudden and almost miraculous figure rising about fifty years ago to create the new Kingdom of Italy, and we forget that he must have formed his first ideas of liberty while hearing at his father's dinner-table that Napoleon was the master of Europe. Similarly, we think of Browning as the great Victorian poet, who lived long enough to have opinions on Mr. Gladstone's Home Rule Bill, and forget that as a young man he passed a bookstall and saw a volume ticketed "Mr. Shelley's Atheistic Poem," and

had to search even in his own really cultivated circle for some one who could tell him who Mr. Shelley was. Browning was, in short, born in the afterglow of the great Revolution.

The French Revolution was at root a thoroughly optimistic thing. It may seem strange to attribute optimism to anything so destructive; but, in truth, this particular kind of optimism is inevitably, and by its nature, destructive. The great dominant idea of the whole of that period, the period before, during, and long after the Revolution, is the idea that man would by his nature live in an Eden of dignity, liberty, and love, and that artificial and decrepit systems are keeping him out of that Eden. No one can do the least justice to the great Jacobins who does not realise that to them breaking the civilisation of ages was like breaking the cords of a treasure-chest. And just as for more than a century great men had dreamed of this beautiful emancipation, so the dream began in the time of Keats and Shelley to creep down among the dullest professions and the most prosaic classes of society. A spirit of revolt was growing among the young of the middle classes, which had nothing at all in common with the complete and pessimistic revolt against all things in heaven or earth, which has been fashionable among the young in more recent times. The Shelleyan enthusiast was altogether on the side of existence; he thought that every cloud and clump of grass shared his strict republican orthodoxy. He represented, in short, a revolt of the normal against the abnormal; he found himself, so to speak, in the heart of a wholly topsy-turvy and blasphemous state of things, in which God was rebelling against Satan.

There began to arise about this time a race of young men like Keats, members of a not highly cultivated middle class, and even of classes lower, who felt in a hundred ways this obscure alliance with eternal things against temporal and practical ones, and who lived on its imaginative delight. They were a kind of furtive universalist; they had discovered the whole cosmos, and they kept the whole cosmos a secret. They climbed up dark stairs to meagre garrets, and shut themselves in with the gods. Numbers of the great men, who afterwards illuminated the Victorian era, were at this time living in mean streets in magnificent daydreams. Ruskin was solemnly visiting his solemn suburban aunts; Dickens was going to and fro in a blacking factory; Carlyle, slightly older, was still lingering on a poor farm in Dumfriesshire; Keats had not long become the assistant of the country surgeon when Browning was a boy in Camberwell. On all sides there was the first beginning of the æsthetic stir in the middle classes which expressed itself in the combination of so many poetic lives with so many prosaic livelihoods. It was the age of inspired office-boys.

Browning grew up, then, with the growing fame of Shelley and Keats, in the atmosphere of literary youth, fierce and beautiful, among new poets who believed in a new world. It is important to remember this, because the real Browning was a quite different person from the grim moralist and metaphysician who is seen through the spectacles of Browning Societies and University Extension Lecturers. Browning was first and foremost a poet, a man made to enjoy all things visible and invisible, a priest of the higher passions. The misunderstanding that has supposed him to be

other than poetical, because his form was often fanciful and abrupt, is really different from the misunderstanding which attaches to most other poets. The opponents of Victor Hugo called him a mere windbag; the opponents of Shakespeare called him a buffoon. But the admirers of Hugo and Shakespeare at least knew better. Now the admirers and opponents of Browning alike make him out to be a pedant rather than a poet. The only difference between the Browningite and the anti-Browningite, is that the second says he was not a poet but a mere philosopher, and the first says he was a philosopher and not a mere poet. The admirer disparages poetry in order to exalt Browning; the opponent exalts poetry in order to disparage Browning; and all the time Browning himself exalted poetry above all earthly things, served it with single-hearted intensity, and stands among the few poets who hardly wrote a line of anything else.

The whole of the boyhood and youth of Robert Browning has as much the quality of pure poetry as the boyhood and youth of Shelley. We do not find in it any trace of the analytical Browning who is believed in by learned ladies and gentlemen. How indeed would such sympathisers feel if informed that the first poems that Browning wrote in a volume called *Incondita* were noticed to contain the fault of "too much splendour of language and too little wealth of thought"? They were indeed Byronic in the extreme, and Browning in his earlier appearances in society presents himself in quite a romantic manner. Macready, the actor, wrote of him: "He looks and speaks more like a young poet than any one I have ever seen." A picturesque tradition remains that Thomas Carlyle,

riding out upon one of his solitary gallops necessitated by his physical sufferings, was stopped by one whom he described as a strangely beautiful youth, who poured out to him without preface or apology his admiration for the great philosopher's works. Browning at this time seems to have left upon many people this impression of physical charm. A friend who attended University College with him says: "He was then a bright handsome youth with long black hair falling over his shoulders." Every tale that remains of him in connection with this period asserts and reasserts the completely romantic spirit by which he was then possessed. He was fond, for example, of following in the track of gipsy caravans, far across country, and a song which he heard with the refrain, "Following the Queen of the Gipsies oh!" rang in his ears long enough to express itself in his soberer and later days in that splendid poem of the spirit of escape and Bohemianism, *The Flight of the Duchess*. Such other of these early glimpses of him as remain, depict him as striding across Wimbledon Common with his hair blowing in the wind, reciting aloud passages from Isaiah, or climbing up into the elms above Norwood to look over London by night. It was when looking down from that suburban eyrie over the whole confounding labyrinth of London that he was filled with that great irresponsible benevolence which is the best of the joys of youth, and conceived the idea of a perfectly irresponsible benevolence in the first plan of *Pippa Passes*. At the end of his father's garden was a laburnum "heavy with its weight of gold," and in the tree two nightingales were in the habit of singing against each other, a form of competition which, I imagine, has since

become less common in Camberwell. When Browning as a boy was intoxicated with the poetry of Shelley and Keats, he hypnotised himself into something approaching to a positive conviction that these two birds were the spirits of the two great poets who had settled in a Camberwell garden, in order to sing to the only young gentleman who really adored and understood them. This last story is perhaps the most typical of the tone common to all the rest; it would be difficult to find a story which across the gulf of nearly eighty years awakens so vividly a sense of the sumptuous folly of an intellectual boyhood. With Browning, as with all true poets, passion came first and made intellectual expression, the hunger for beauty making literature as the hunger for bread made a plough. The life he lived in those early days was no life of dull application; there was no poet whose youth was so young. When he was full of years and fame, and delineating in great epics the beauty and horror of the romance of southern Europe, a young man, thinking to please him, said, "There is no romance now except in Italy." "Well," said Browning, "I should make an exception of Camberwell."

Such glimpses will serve to indicate the kind of essential issue that there was in the nature of things between the generation of Browning and the generation of his father. Browning was bound in the nature of things to become at the outset Byronic, and Byronism was not, of course, in reality so much a pessimism about civilised things as an optimism about savage things. This great revolt on behalf of the elemental which Keats and Shelley represented was bound first of all to occur. Robert Browning junior had to be a part of it,

and Robert Browning senior had to go back to his water colours and the faultless couplets of Pope with the full sense of the greatest pathos that the world contains, the pathos of the man who has produced something that he cannot understand.

The earliest works of Browning bear witness, without exception, to this ardent and somewhat sentimental evolution. *Pauline* appeared anonymously in 1833. It exhibits the characteristic mark of a juvenile poem, the general suggestion that the author is a thousand years old. Browning calls it a fragment of a confession; and Mr. Johnson Fox, an old friend of Browning's father, who reviewed it for *Tait's Magazine*, said, with truth, that it would be difficult to find anything more purely confessional. It is the typical confession of a boy laying bare all the spiritual crimes of infidelity and moral waste, in a state of genuine ignorance of the fact that every one else has committed them. It is wholesome and natural for youth to go about confessing that the grass is green, and whispering to a priest hoarsely that it has found a sun in heaven. But the records of that particular period of development, even when they are as ornate and beautiful as *Pauline*, are not necessarily or invariably wholesome reading. The chief interest of *Pauline*, with all its beauties, lies in a certain almost humorous singularity, the fact that Browning, of all people, should have signalled his entrance into the world of letters with a poem which may fairly be called morbid. But this is a morbidity so general and recurrent that it may be called in a contradictory phrase a healthy morbidity; it is a kind of intellectual measles. No one of any degree of maturity in reading *Pauline* will be quite so horrified

at the sins of the young gentleman who tells the story as he seems to be himself. It is the utterance of that bitter and heartrending period of youth which comes before we realise the one grand and logical basis of all optimism—the doctrine of original sin. The boy at this stage being an ignorant and inhuman idealist, regards all his faults as frightful secret malformations, and it is only later that he becomes conscious of that large and beautiful and benignant explanation that the heart of man is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked. That Browning, whose judgment on his own work was one of the best in the world, took this view of *Pauline* in after years is quite obvious. He displayed a very manly and unique capacity of really laughing at his own work without being in the least ashamed of it. "This," he said of *Pauline*, "is the only crab apple that remains of the shapely tree of life in my fool's paradise." It would be difficult to express the matter more perfectly. Although *Pauline* was published anonymously, its authorship was known to a certain circle, and Browning began to form friendships in the literary world. He had already become acquainted with two of the best friends he was ever destined to have, Alfred Domett, celebrated in "The Guardian Angel" and "Waring," and his cousin Silverthorne, whose death is spoken of in one of the most perfect lyrics in the English language, Browning's "May and Death." These were men of his own age, and his manner of speaking of them gives us many glimpses into that splendid world of comradeship which Plato and Walt Whitman knew, with its endless days and its immortal nights. Browning had a third friend destined to play an even greater part in his life, but who belonged to an older

generation and a stately school of manners and scholarship. Mr. Kenyon was a schoolfellow of Browning's father, and occupied towards his son something of the position of an irresponsible uncle. He was a rotund, rosy old gentleman, fond of comfort and the courtesies of life, but fonder of them more for others, though much for himself. Elizabeth Barrett in after years wrote of "the brightness of his carved speech," which would appear to suggest that he practised that urbane and precise order of wit which was even then old-fashioned. Yet, notwithstanding many talents of this kind, he was not so much an able man as the natural friend and equal of able men.

Browning's circle of friends, however, widened about this time in all directions. One friend in particular he made, the Comte de Ripert-Monclar, a French Royalist with whom he prosecuted with renewed energy his studies in the mediæval and Renaissance schools of philosophy. It was the Count who suggested that Browning should write a poetical play on the subject of Paracelsus. After reflection, indeed, the Count retracted this advice on the ground that the history of the great mystic gave no room for love. Undismayed by this terrible deficiency, Browning caught up the idea with characteristic enthusiasm, and in 1835 appeared the first of his works which he himself regarded as representative—*Paracelsus*. The poem shows an enormous advance in technical literary power; but in the history of Browning's mind it is chiefly interesting as giving an example of a peculiarity which clung to him during the whole of his literary life, an intense love of the holes and corners of history. Fifty-two years afterwards he wrote *Parleyings with certain Per-*

sons of Importance in their Day, the last poem published in his lifetime; and any reader of that remarkable work will perceive that the common characteristic of all these persons is not so much that they were of importance in their day as that they are of no importance in ours. The same eccentric fastidiousness worked in him as a young man when he wrote *Paracelsus* and *Sordello*. Nowhere in Browning's poetry can we find any very exhaustive study of any of the great men who are the favourites of the poet and moralist. He has written about philosophy and ambition and music and morals, but he has written nothing about Socrates or Cæsar or Napoleon, or Beethoven or Mozart, or Buddha or Mahomet. When he wishes to describe a political ambition he selects that entirely unknown individual, King Victor of Sardinia. When he wishes to express the most perfect soul of music, he unearths some extraordinary persons called Abt Vogler and Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha. When he wishes to express the largest and sublimest scheme of morals and religion which his imagination can conceive, he does not put it into the mouth of any of the great spiritual leaders of mankind, but into the mouth of an obscure Jewish Rabbi of the name of Ben Ezra. It is fully in accordance with this fascinating craze of his that when he wishes to study the deification of the intellect and the disinterested pursuit of the things of the mind, he does not select any of the great philosophers from Plato to Darwin, whose investigations are still of some importance in the eyes of the world. He selects the figure of all figures most covered with modern satire and pity, *a priori* the scientist of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. His supreme type of the human intellect

is neither the academic nor the positivist, but the alchemist. It is difficult to imagine a turn of mind constituting a more complete challenge to the ordinary modern point of view. To the intellect of our time the wild investigators of the school of Paracelsus seem to be the very crown and flower of futility, they are collectors of straws and careful misers of dust. But for all that Browning was right. Any critic who understands the true spirit of mediæval science can see that he was right; no critic can see how right he was unless he understands the spirit of mediæval science as thoroughly as he did. In the character of Paracelsus, Browning wished to paint the dangers and disappointments which attend the man who believes merely in the intellect. He wished to depict the fall of the logician; and with a perfect and unerring instinct he selected a man who wrote and spoke in the tradition of the Middle Ages, the most thoroughly and even painfully logical period that the world has ever seen. If he had chosen an ancient Greek philosopher, it would have been open to the critic to have said that that philosopher relied to some extent upon the most sunny and graceful social life that ever flourished. If he had made him a modern sociological professor, it would have been possible to object that his energies were not wholly concerned with truth, but partly with the solid and material satisfaction of society. But the man truly devoted to the things of the mind was the mediæval magician. It is a remarkable fact that one civilisation does not satisfy itself by calling another civilisation wicked—it calls it uncivilised. We call the Chinese barbarians, and they call us barbarians. The mediæval

state, like China, was a foreign civilisation, and this was its supreme characteristic, that it cared for the things of the mind for their own sake. To complain of the researches of its sages on the ground that they were not materially fruitful, is to act as we should act in telling a gardener that his roses were not as digestible as our cabbages. It is not only true that the mediæval philosophers never discovered the steam-engine; it is quite equally true that they never tried. The Eden of the Middle Ages was really a garden, where each of God's flowers—truth and beauty and reason—flourished for its own sake, and with its own name. The Eden of modern progress is a kitchen garden.

It would have been hard, therefore, for Browning to have chosen a better example for his study of intellectual egotism than Paracelsus. Modern life accuses the mediæval tradition of crushing the intellect; Browning, with a truer instinct, accuses that tradition of over-glorifying it. There is, however, another and even more important deduction to be made from the moral of *Paracelsus*. The usual accusation against Browning is that he was consumed with logic; that he thought all subjects to be the proper pabulum of intellectual disquisition; that he gloried chiefly in his own power of plucking knots to pieces and rending fallacies in two; and that to this method he sacrificed deliberately, and with complete self-complacency, the element of poetry and sentiment. To people who imagine Browning to have been this frigid believer in the intellect there is only one answer necessary or sufficient. It is the fact that he wrote a play designed to destroy the whole of this intellectualist fallacy at the age of twenty-three.

Paracelsus was in all likelihood Browning's intro-

duction to the literary world. It was many years, and even many decades, before he had anything like a public appreciation, but a very great part of the minority of those who were destined to appreciate him came over to his standard upon the publication of *Paracelsus*. The celebrated John Forster had taken up *Paracelsus* "as a thing to slate," and had ended its perusal with the wildest curiosity about the author and his works. John Stuart Mill, never backward in generosity, had already interested himself in Browning, and was finally converted by the same poem. Among other early admirers were Landor, Leigh Hunt, Horne, Serjeant Talfourd, and Monckton Milnes. One man of even greater literary stature seems to have come into Browning's life about this time, a man for whom he never ceased to have the warmest affection and trust. Browning was, indeed, one of the very few men of that period who got on perfectly with Thomas Carlyle. It is precisely one of those little things which speak volumes for the honesty and unfathomable good humour of Browning, that Carlyle, who had a reckless contempt for most other poets of his day, had something amounting to a real attachment to him. He would run over to Paris for the mere privilege of dining with him. Browning, on the other hand, with characteristic impetuosity, passionately defended and justified Carlyle in all companies. "I have just seen dear Carlyle," he writes on one occasion; "catch me calling people dear in a hurry, except in a letter beginning." He sided with Carlyle in the vexed question of the Carlyle domestic relations, and his impression of Mrs. Carlyle was that she was "a hard unlovable woman." As, however, it is on record that

he once, while excitedly explaining some point of mystical philosophy, put down Mrs. Carlyle's hot kettle on the hearthrug, any frigidity that he may have observed in her manner may possibly find a natural explanation. His partisanship in the Carlyle affair, which was characteristically headlong and human, may not throw much light on that painful problem itself, but it throws a great deal of light on the character of Browning, which was pugnaciously proud of its friends, and had what may almost be called a lust of loyalty. Browning was not capable of that most sagacious detachment which enabled Tennyson to say that he could not agree that the Carlyles ought never to have married, since if they had each married elsewhere there would have been four miserable people instead of two.

Among the motley and brilliant crowd with which Browning had now begun to mingle, there was no figure more eccentric and spontaneous than that of Macready the actor. This extraordinary person, a man living from hand to mouth in all things spiritual and pecuniary, a man feeding upon flying emotions, conceived something like an attraction towards Browning, spoke of him as the very ideal of a young poet, and in a moment of peculiar excitement suggested to him the writing of a great play. Browning was a man fundamentally indeed more steadfast and prosaic, but on the surface fully as rapid and easily infected as Macready. He immediately began to plan out a great historical play, and selected for his subject "Strafford."

In Browning's treatment of the subject there is something more than a trace of his Puritan and Liberal

upbringing. It is one of the very earliest of the really important works in English literature which are based on the Parliamentary reading of the incidents of the time of Charles I. It is true that the finest element in the play is the opposition between Strafford and Pym, an opposition so complete, so lucid, so consistent, that it has, so to speak, something of the friendly openness and agreement which belongs to an alliance. The two men love each other and fight each other, and do the two things at the same time completely. This is a great thing of which even to attempt the description. It is easy to have the impartiality which can speak judicially of both parties, but it is not so easy to have that larger and higher impartiality which can speak passionately on behalf of both parties. Nevertheless, it may be permissible to repeat that there is in the play a definite trace of Browning's Puritan education and Puritan historical outlook.

For *Strafford* is, of course, an example of that most difficult of all literary works — a political play. The thing has been achieved once at least admirably in Shakespeare's *Julius Cæsar*, and something like it, though from a more one-sided and romantic standpoint, has been done excellently in *L'Aiglon*. But the difficulties of such a play are obvious on the face of the matter. In a political play the principal characters are not merely men. They are symbols, arithmetical figures representing millions of other men outside. It is, by dint of elaborate stage management, possible to bring a mob upon the boards, but the largest mob ever known is nothing but a floating atom of the people; and the people of which the politician has to think does not consist of knots of

rioters in the street, but of some million absolutely distinct individuals, each sitting in his own breakfast room reading his own morning paper. To give even the faintest suggestion of the strength and size of the people in this sense in the course of a dramatic performance is obviously impossible. That is why it is so easy on the stage to concentrate all the pathos and dignity upon such persons as Charles I. and Mary Queen of Scots, the vampires of their people, because within the minute limits of a stage there is room for their small virtues and no room for their enormous crimes. It would be impossible to find a stronger example than the case of *Strafford*. It is clear that no one could possibly tell the whole truth about the life and death of Strafford, politically considered, in a play. Strafford was one of the greatest men ever born in England, and he attempted to found a great English official despotism. That is to say, he attempted to found something which is so different from what has actually come about that we can in reality scarcely judge of it, any more than we can judge whether it would be better to live in another planet, or pleasanter to have been born a dog or an elephant. It would require enormous imagination to reconstruct the political ideals of Strafford. Now Browning, as we all know, got over the matter in his play, by practically denying that Strafford had any political ideals at all. That is to say, while crediting Strafford with all his real majesty of intellect and character, he makes the whole of his political action dependent upon his passionate personal attachment to the King. This is unsatisfactory; it is in reality a dodging of the great difficulty of the political play.

That difficulty, in the case of any political problem, is, as has been said, great. It would be very hard, for example, to construct a play about Mr. Gladstone's Home Rule Bill. It would be almost impossible to get expressed in a drama of some five acts and some twenty characters anything so ancient and complicated as that Irish problem, the roots of which lie in the darkness of the age of Strongbow, and the branches of which spread out to the remotest commonwealths of the East and West. But we should scarcely be satisfied if a dramatist overcame the difficulty by ascribing Mr. Gladstone's action in the Home Rule question to an overwhelming personal affection for Mr. Healy. And in thus basing Strafford's action upon personal and private reasons, Browning certainly does some injustice to the political greatness of Strafford. To attribute Mr. Gladstone's conversion to Home Rule to an infatuation such as that suggested above, would certainly have the air of implying that the writer thought the Home Rule doctrine a peculiar or untenable one. Similarly, Browning's choice of a motive for Strafford has very much the air of an assumption that there was nothing to be said on public grounds for Strafford's political ideal. Now this is certainly not the case. The Puritans in the great struggles of the reign of Charles I. may have possessed more valuable ideals than the Royalists, but it is a very vulgar error to suppose that they were any more idealistic. In Browning's play Pym is made almost the incarnation of public spirit, and Strafford of private ties. But not only may an upholder of despotism be public-spirited, but in the case of prominent upholders of it like Strafford he generally is. Despotism

indeed, and attempts at despotism, like that of Strafford, are a kind of disease of public spirit. They represent, as it were, the drunkenness of responsibility. It is when men begin to grow desperate in their love for the people, when they are overwhelmed with the difficulties and blunders of humanity, that they fall back upon a wild desire to manage everything themselves. Their faith in themselves is only a disillusionment with mankind. They are in that most dreadful position, dreadful alike in personal and public affairs—the position of the man who has lost faith and not lost love. This belief that all would go right if we could only get the strings into our own hands is a fallacy almost without exception, but nobody can justly say that it is not public-spirited. The sin and sorrow of despotism is not that it does not love men, but that it loves them too much and trusts them too little. Therefore from age to age in history arise these great despotic dreamers, whether they be Royalists or Imperialists or even Socialists, who have at root this idea, that the world would enter into rest if it went their way and forswore altogether the right of going its own way. When a man begins to think that the grass will not grow at night unless he lies awake to watch it, he generally ends either in an asylum or on the throne of an Emperor. Of these men Strafford was one, and we cannot but feel that Browning somewhat narrows the significance and tragedy of his place in history by making him merely the champion of a personal idiosyncrasy against a great public demand. Strafford was something greater than this; if indeed, when we come to think of it, a man can be anything greater than the friend of another man. But the whole

question is interesting, because Browning, although he never again attacked a political drama of such palpable importance as *Strafford*, could never keep politics altogether out of his dramatic work. *King Victor and King Charles*, which followed it, is a political play, the study of a despotic instinct much meaner than that of *Strafford*. *Colombe's Birthday*, again, is political as well as romantic. Politics in its historic aspect would seem to have had a great fascination for him, as indeed it must have for all ardent intellects, since it is the one thing in the world that is as intellectual as the *Encyclopædia Britannica* and as rapid as the Derby.

One of the favourite subjects among those who like to conduct long controversies about Browning (and their name is legion) is the question of whether Browning's plays, such as *Strafford*, were successes upon the stage. As they are never agreed about what constitutes a success on the stage, it is difficult to adjudge their quarrels. But the general fact is very simple; such a play as *Strafford* was not a gigantic theatrical success, and nobody, it is to be presumed, ever imagined that it would be. On the other hand, it was certainly not a failure, but was enjoyed and applauded as are hundreds of excellent plays which run only for a week or two, as many excellent plays do, and as all plays ought to do. Above all, the definite success which attended the representation of *Strafford* from the point of view of the more educated and appreciative was quite enough to establish Browning in a certain definite literary position. As a classical and established personality he did not come into his kingdom for years and decades afterwards; not, indeed, until he was near to entering upon the final rest. But as a detached and eccentric personality, as a man who existed and who

had arisen on the outskirts of literature, the world began to be conscious of him at this time.

Of what he was personally at the period that he thus became personally apparent, Mrs. Bridell Fox has left a very vivid little sketch. She describes how Browning called at the house (he was acquainted with her father), and finding that gentleman out, asked with a kind of abrupt politeness if he might play on the piano. This touch is very characteristic of the mingled aplomb and unconsciousness of Browning's social manner. "He was then," she writes, "slim and dark, and very handsome, and—may I hint it?—just a trifle of a dandy, addicted to lemon-coloured kid gloves and such things, quite the glass of fashion and the mould of form. But full of 'ambition,' eager for success, eager for fame, and, what is more, determined to conquer fame and to achieve success." That is as good a portrait as we can have of the Browning of these days—a quite self-satisfied, but not self-conscious young man; one who had outgrown, but only just outgrown, the pure romanticism of his boyhood, which made him run after gipsy caravans and listen to nightingales in the wood; a man whose incandescent vitality, now that it had abandoned gipsies and not yet immersed itself in casuistical poems, devoted itself excitedly to trifles, such as lemon-coloured kid gloves and fame. But a man still above all things perfectly young and natural, professing that foppery which follows the fashions, and not that sillier and more demoralising foppery which defies them. Just as he walked in coolly and yet impulsively into a private drawing-room and offered to play, so he walked at this time into the huge and crowded salon of European literature and offered to sing.

CHAPTER II

EARLY WORKS

IN 1840 *Sordello* was published. Its reception by the great majority of readers, including some of the ablest men of the time, was a reception of a kind probably unknown in the rest of literary history, a reception that was neither praise nor blame. It was perhaps best expressed by Carlyle, who wrote to say that his wife had read *Sordello* with great interest, and wished to know whether *Sordello* was a man, or a city, or a book. Better known, of course, is the story of Tennyson, who said that the first line of the poem —

“Who will, may hear *Sordello*’s story told,”

and the last line —

“Who would has heard *Sordello*’s story told,”

were the only two lines in the poem that he understood, and they were lies.

Perhaps the best story, however, of all the cycle of *Sordello* legends is that which is related of Douglas Jerrold. He was recovering from an illness; and having obtained permission for the first time to read a little during the day, he picked up a book from a pile beside the bed and began *Sordello*. No sooner had he done so than he turned deadly pale, put down the

book, and said, "My God! I'm an idiot. My health is restored, but my mind's gone. I can't understand two consecutive lines of an English poem." He then summoned his family and silently gave the book into their hands, asking for their opinion on the poem; and as the shadow of perplexity gradually passed over their faces, he heaved a sigh of relief and went to sleep. These stories, whether accurate or no, do undoubtedly represent the very peculiar reception accorded to *Sordello*, a reception which, as I have said, bears no resemblance whatever to anything in the way of eulogy or condemnation that had ever been accorded to a work of art before. There had been authors whom it was fashionable to boast of admiring and authors whom it was fashionable to boast of despising; but with *Sordello* enters into literary history the Browning of popular badinage, the author whom it is fashionable to boast of not understanding.

Putting aside for the moment the literary qualities which are to be found in the poem, when it becomes intelligible, there is one question very relevant to the fame and character of Browning which is raised by *Sordello* when it is considered, as most people consider it, as hopelessly unintelligible. It really throws some light upon the reason of Browning's obscurity. The ordinary theory of Browning's obscurity is to the effect that it was a piece of intellectual vanity indulged in more and more insolently as his years and fame increased. There are at least two very decisive objections to this popular explanation. In the first place, it must emphatically be said for Browning that in all the numerous records and impressions of him throughout his long and very public life, there is not one iota of

evidence that he was a man who was intellectually vain. The evidence is entirely the other way. He was vain of many things, of his physical health, for example, and even more of the physical health which he contrived to bestow for a certain period upon his wife. From the records of his early dandyism, his flowing hair and his lemon-coloured gloves, it is probable enough that he was vain of his good looks. He was vain of his masculinity, his knowledge of the world, and he was, I fancy, decidedly vain of his prejudices, even, it might be said, vain of being vain of them. But everything is against the idea that he was much in the habit of thinking of himself in his intellectual aspect. In the matter of conversation, for example, some people who liked him found him genial, talkative, anecdotal, with a certain strengthening and sanative quality in his mere bodily presence. Some people who did not like him found him a mere frivolous chatterer, afflicted with bad manners. One lady, who knew him well, said that, though he only met you in a crowd and made some commonplace remark, you went for the rest of the day with your head up. Another lady who did not know him, and therefore disliked him, asked after a dinner party, "Who was that too-exuberant financier?" These are the diversities of feeling about him. But they all agree in one point — that he did not talk cleverly, or try to talk cleverly, as that proceeding is understood in literary circles. He talked positively, he talked a great deal, but he never attempted to give that neat and æsthetic character to his speech which is almost invariable in the case of the man who is vain of his mental superiority. When he did impress people with mental gymnastics, it was mostly in the form of pouring

out, with passionate enthusiasm, whole epics written by other people, which is the last thing that the literary egotist would be likely to waste his time over. We have therefore to start with an enormous psychological improbability that Browning made his poems complicated from mere pride in his powers and contempt of his readers.

There is, however, another very practical objection to the ordinary theory that Browning's obscurity was a part of the intoxication of fame and intellectual consideration. We constantly hear the statement that Browning's intellectual complexity increased with his later poems, but the statement is simply not true. *Sordello*, to the indescribable density of which he never afterwards even approached, was begun before *Strafford*, and was therefore the third of his works, and even if we adopt his own habit of ignoring *Pauline*, the second. He wrote the greater part of it when he was twenty-four. It was in his youth, at the time when a man is thinking of love and publicity, of sunshine and singing birds, that he gave birth to this horror of great darkness; and the more we study the matter with any knowledge of the nature of youth, the more we shall come to the conclusion that Browning's obscurity had altogether the opposite origin to that which is usually assigned to it. He was not unintelligible because he was proud, but unintelligible because he was humble. He was not unintelligible because his thoughts were vague, but because to him they were obvious.

A man who is intellectually vain does not make himself incomprehensible, because he is so enormously impressed with the difference between his readers'

ception that he was what the French call an intellectual. If we see Browning with the eyes of his particular followers, we shall inevitably think this. For his followers are pre-eminently intellectuals, and there never lived upon the earth a great man who was so fundamentally different from his followers. Indeed, he felt this heartily and even humorously himself. "Wilkes was no Wilkite," he said, "and I am very far from being a Browningite." We shall, as I say, utterly misunderstand Browning at every step of his career if we suppose that he was the sort of man who would be likely to take a pleasure in asserting the subtlety and abstruseness of his message. He took pleasure beyond all question in himself; in the strictest sense of the word he enjoyed himself. But his conception of himself was never that of the intellectual. He conceived himself rather as a sanguine and strenuous man, a great fighter. "I was ever," as he says, "a fighter." His faults, a certain occasional fierceness and grossness, were the faults that are counted as virtues among navvies and sailors and most primitive men. His virtues, boyishness and absolute fidelity, and a love of plain words and things are the virtues which are counted as vices among the æsthetic prigs who pay him the greatest honour. He had his more objectionable side, like other men, but it had nothing to do with literary egotism. He was not vain of being an extraordinary man. He was only somewhat excessively vain of being an ordinary one.

The Browning then who published *Sordello* we have to conceive, not as a young pedant anxious to exaggerate his superiority to the public, but as a hot-headed, strong-minded, inexperienced, and essentially humble

man, who had more ideas than he knew how to disentangle from each other. If we compare, for example, the complexity of Browning with the clarity of Matthew Arnold, we shall realise that the cause lies in the fact that Matthew Arnold was an intellectual aristocrat, and Browning an intellectual democrat. The particular peculiarities of *Sordello* illustrate the matter very significantly. A very great part of the difficulty of *Sordello*, for instance, is in the fact that before the reader even approaches to tackling the difficulties of Browning's actual narrative, he is apparently expected to start with an exhaustive knowledge of that most shadowy and bewildering of all human epochs—the period of the Guelph and Ghibelline struggles in mediæval Italy. Here, of course, Browning simply betrays that impetuous humility which we have previously observed. His father was a student of mediæval chronicles, he had himself imbibed that learning in the same casual manner in which a boy learns to walk or to play cricket. Consequently in a literary sense he rushed up to the first person he met and began talking about Ecelo and Taurello Salinguerra with about as much literary egotism as an English baby shows when it talks English to an Italian organ grinder. Beyond this the poem of *Sordello*, powerful as it is, does not present any very significant advance in Browning's mental development on that already represented by *Pauline* and *Paracelsus*. *Pauline*, *Paracelsus*, and *Sordello* stand together in the general fact that they are all, in the excellent phrase used about the first by Mr. Johnson Fox, "confessional." All three are analyses of the weakness which every artistic temperament finds in

every one else, when awakened to the beauty and variety of men, dreamed of this arrogant self-effacement. He has written of himself that he had long thought vaguely of a being passing through the world, obscure and unnameable, but moulding the destinies of others to mightier and better issues. Then his almost faultless artistic instinct came in and suggested that this being, whom he dramatised as the work-girl, Pippa, should be even unconscious of anything but her own happiness and should sway men's lives with a lonely mirth. It was a bold and moving conception to show us these mature and tragic human groups all at the supreme moment eavesdropping upon the solitude of a child. And it was an even more precise instinct which made Browning make the errant benefactor a woman. A man's good work is effected by doing what he does, a woman's by being what she is.

There is one other point about *Pippa Passes* which is worth a moment's attention. The great difficulty with regard to the understanding of Browning is the fact that, to all appearance, scarcely any one can be induced to take him seriously as a literary artist. His adversaries consider his literary vagaries a disqualification for every position among poets; and his admirers regard those vagaries with the affectionate indulgence of a circle of maiden aunts towards a boy home for the holidays. Browning is supposed to do as he likes with form, because he had such a profound scheme of thought. But, as a matter of fact, though few of his followers will take Browning's literary form seriously, he took his own literary form very seriously. Now *Pippa Passes* is, among other things, eminently remarkable as a very original artistic form, a series of

disconnected but dramatic scenes which have only in common the appearance of one figure. For this admirable literary departure Browning, amid all the laudations of his "mind" and his "message," has scarcely ever had credit. And just as we should, if we took Browning seriously as a poet, see that he had made many noble literary forms, so we should also see that he did make from time to time certain definite literary mistakes. There is one of them, a glaring one, in *Pippa Passes*; and, as far as I know, no critic has ever thought enough of Browning as an artist to point it out. It is a gross falsification of the whole beauty of *Pippa Passes* to make the Monseigneur and his accomplice in the last act discuss a plan touching the fate of Pippa herself. The whole central and splendid idea of the drama is the fact that Pippa is utterly remote from the grand folk whose lives she troubles and transforms. To make her in the end turn out to be the niece of one of them, is like a whiff from an Adelphi melodrama, an excellent thing in its place, but destructive of the entire conception of Pippa. Having done that, Browning might just as well have made Sebald turn out to be her long lost brother, and Luigi a husband to whom she was secretly married. Browning made this mistake when his own splendid artistic power was only growing, and its merits and its faults in a tangle. But its real literary merits and its real literary faults have alike remained unrecognised under the influence of that unfortunate intellectualism which idolises Browning as a metaphysician and neglects him as a poet. But a better test was coming. Browning's poetry, in the most strictly poetical sense, reached its flower in *Dramatic Lyrics*, published in

1842. Here he showed himself a picturesque and poignant artist in a wholly original manner. And the two main characteristics of the work were the two characteristics most commonly denied to Browning, both by his opponents and his followers, passion and beauty; but beauty had enlarged her boundaries in new modes of dramatic arrangement, and passion had found new voices in fantastic and realistic verse. Those who suppose Browning to be a wholly philosophic poet, number a great majority of his commentators. But when we come to look at the actual facts, they are strangely and almost unexpectedly otherwise.

Let any one who believes in the arrogantly intellectual character of Browning's poetry run through the actual répertoire of the *Dramatic Lyrics*. The first item consists of those splendid war chants called "Cavalier Tunes." I do not imagine that any one will maintain that there is any very mysterious metaphysical aim in them. The second item is the fine poem "The Lost Leader," a poem which expresses in perfectly lucid and lyrical verse a perfectly normal and old-fashioned indignation. It is the same, however far we carry the query. What theory does the next poem, "How they brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix," express, except the daring speculation that it is often exciting to ride a good horse in Belgium? What theory does the poem after that, "Through the Metidja to Abd-el-Kadr," express, except that it is also frequently exciting to ride a good horse in Africa? Then comes "Nationality in Drinks," a mere technical oddity without a gleam of philosophy; and after that those two entirely exquisite "Garden Fancies," the first of which is devoted to the abstruse thesis that a woman may be

charming, and the second to the equally abstruse thesis that a book may be a bore. Then comes "The Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister," from which the most ingenious "Browning student" cannot extract anything except that people sometimes hate each other in Spain; and then "The Laboratory," from which he could extract nothing except that people sometimes hate each other in France. This is a perfectly honest record of the poems as they stand. And the first eleven poems read straight off are remarkable for these two obvious characteristics — first, that they contain not even a suggestion of anything that could be called philosophy; and second, that they contain a considerable proportion of the best and most typical poems that Browning ever wrote. It may be repeated that either he wrote these lyrics because he had an artistic sense, or it is impossible to hazard even the wildest guess as to why he wrote them.

It is permissible to say that the *Dramatic Lyrics* represent the arrival of the real Browning of literary history. It is true that he had written already many admirable poems of a far more ambitious plan — *Paracelsus* with its splendid version of the faults of the intellectual, *Pippa Passes* with its beautiful deification of unconscious influence. But youth is always ambitious and universal; mature work exhibits more of individuality, more of the special type and colour of work which a man is destined to do. Youth is universal, but not individual. The genius who begins life with a very genuine and sincere doubt whether he is meant to be an exquisite and idolised violinist, or the most powerful and eloquent Prime Minister of modern times, does at last end by making the dis-

covery that there is, after all, one thing, possibly a certain style of illustrating Nursery Rhymes, which he can really do better than any one else. This was what happened to Browning; like every one else, he had to discover first the universe, and then humanity, and at last himself. With him, as with all others, the great paradox and the great definition of life was this, that the ambition narrows as the mind expands. In *Dramatic Lyrics* he discovered the one thing that he could really do better than any one else—the dramatic lyric. The form is absolutely original: he had discovered a new field of poetry, and in the centre of that field he had found himself.

The actual quality, the actual originality of the form is a little difficult to describe. But its general characteristic is the fearless and most dexterous use of grotesque things in order to express sublime emotions. The best and most characteristic of the poems are love poems; they express almost to perfection the real wonderland of youth, but they do not express it by the ideal imagery of most poets of love. The imagery of these poems consists, if we may take a rapid survey of Browning's love poetry, of suburban streets, straws, garden-rakes, medicine bottles, pianos, window-blinds, burnt cork, fashionable fur coats. But in this new method he thoroughly expressed the real essential, the insatiable realism of passion. If any one wished to prove that Browning was not, as he is said to be, the poet of thought, but pre-eminently one of the poets of passion, we could scarcely find a better evidence of this profoundly passionate element than Browning's astonishing realism in love poetry. There is nothing so fiercely realistic as sentiment and

emotion. Thought and the intellect are content to accept abstractions, summaries, and generalisations; they are content that ten acres of ground should be called for the sake of argument X, and ten widows' incomes called for the sake of argument Y; they are content that a thousand awful and mysterious disappearances from the visible universe should be summed up as the mortality of a district, or that ten thousand intoxications of the soul should bear the general name of the instinct of sex. Rationalism can live upon air and signs and numbers. But sentiment must have reality; emotion demands the real fields, the real widows' homes, the real corpse, and the real woman. And therefore Browning's love poetry is the finest love poetry in the world, because it does not talk about raptures and ideals and gates of heaven, but about window-panes and gloves and garden walls. It does not deal much with abstractions; it is the truest of all love poetry, because it does not speak much about love. It awakens in every man the memories of that immortal instant when common and dead things had a meaning beyond the power of any dictionary to utter, and a value beyond the power of any millionaire to compute. He expresses the celestial time when a man does not think about heaven, but about a parasol. And therefore he is first the greatest of love poets, and secondly the only optimistic philosopher except Whitman.

The general accusation against Browning in connection with his use of the grotesque comes in very definitely here; for in using these homely and practical images, these allusions, bordering on what many would call the commonplace, he was indeed true to the actual and abiding spirit of love. In that delightful poem

“ Youth and Art ” we have the singing girl saying to her old lover —

“ No harm ! It was not my fault,
 If you never turned your eye’s tail up
 As I shook-upon E *in alt*,
 Or ran the chromatic scale up.”

This is a great deal more like the real chaff that passes between those whose hearts are full of new hope or of old memory than half the great poems of the world. Browning never forgets the little details which to a man who has ever really lived may suddenly send an arrow through the heart. Take, for example, such a matter as dress, as it is treated in “ A Lover’s Quarrel.”

“ See, how she looks now, dressed
 In a sledging cap and vest !
 ’Tis a huge fur cloak —
 Like a reindeer’s yoke
 Falls the lappet along the breast :
 Sleeves for her arms to rest,
 Or to hang, as my Love likes best.”

That would almost serve as an order to a dressmaker, and is therefore poetry, or at least excellent poetry of this order. So great a power have these dead things of taking hold on the living spirit, that I question whether any one could read through the catalogue of a miscellaneous auction sale without coming upon things which, if realised for a moment, would be near to the elemental tears. And if any of us or all of us are truly optimists, and believe as Browning did, that existence has a value wholly inexpressible, we are most truly compelled to that sentiment not by any argument or triumphant justification of the cosmos,

but by a few of these momentary and immortal sights and sounds, a gesture, an old song, a portrait, a piano, an old door.

In 1843 appeared that marvellous drama *The Return of the Druses*, a work which contains more of Browning's typical qualities exhibited in an exquisite literary shape, than can easily be counted. We have in *The Return of the Druses* his love of the corners of history his interest in the religious mind of the East, with its almost terrifying sense of being in the hand of heaven, his love of colour and verbal luxury, of gold and green and purple, which made some think he must be an Oriental himself. But, above all, it presents the first rise of that great psychological ambition which Browning was thenceforth to pursue. In *Pauline* and the poems that follow it, Browning has only the comparatively easy task of giving an account of himself. In *Pippa Passes* he has the only less easy task of giving an account of humanity. In *The Return of the Druses* he has for the first time the task which is so much harder than giving an account of humanity—the task of giving an account of a human being. Djabal, the great Oriental impostor, who is the central character of the play, is a peculiarly subtle character, a compound of blasphemous and lying assumptions of Godhead with genuine and stirring patriotic and personal feelings: he is a blend, so to speak, of a base divinity and of a noble humanity. He is supremely important in the history of Browning's mind, for he is the first of that great series of the apologiæ of apparently evil men, on which the poet was to pour out so much of his imaginative wealth—Djabal, Fra Lippo, Bishop Blougram, Sludge, Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau, and the hero of *Fifine at the Fair*.

With this play, so far as any point can be fixed for the matter, he enters for the first time on the most valuable of all his labours—the defence of the indefensible. It may be noticed that Browning was not in the least content with the fact that certain human frailties had always lain more or less under an implied indulgence; that all human sentiment had agreed that a profligate might be generous, or that a drunkard might be high-minded. He was insatiable: he wished to go further and show in a character like Djabal that an impostor might be generous and that a liar might be high-minded. In all his life, it must constantly be remembered, he tried always the most difficult things. Just as he tried the queerest metres and attempted to manage them, so he tried the queerest human souls and attempted to stand in their place. Charity was his basic philosophy; but it was, as it were, a fierce charity, a charity that went man-hunting. He was a kind of cosmic detective who walked into the foulest of thieves' kitchens and accused men publicly of virtue. The character of Djabal in *The Return of the Druses* is the first of this long series of forlorn hopes for the relief of long surrendered castles of misconduct. As we shall see, even realising the humanity of a noble impostor like Djabal did not content his erratic hunger for goodness. He went further again, and realised the humanity of a mean impostor like Sludge. But in all things he retained this essential characteristic, that he was not content with seeking sinners—he sought the sinners whom even sinners cast out.

Browning's feeling of ambition in the matter of the drama continued to grow at this time. It must be remembered that he had every natural tendency to be

theatrical, though he lacked the essential lucidity. He was not, as a matter of fact, a particularly unsuccessful dramatist; but in the world of abstract temperaments he was by nature an unsuccessful dramatist. He was, that is to say, a man who loved above all things plain and sensational words, open catastrophes, a clear and ringing conclusion to everything. But it so happened, unfortunately, that his own words were not plain; that his catastrophes came with a crashing and sudden unintelligibility which left men in doubt whether the thing were a catastrophe or a great stroke of good luck; that his conclusion, though it rang like a trumpet to the four corners of heaven, was in its actual message quite inaudible. We are bound to admit, on the authority of all his best critics and admirers, that his plays were not failures, but we can all feel that they should have been. He was, as it were, by nature a neglected dramatist. He was one of those who achieve the reputation, in the literal sense, of eccentricity by their frantic efforts to reach the centre.

A Blot on the 'Scutcheon followed *The Return of the Druses*. In connection with the performance of this very fine play a quarrel arose which would not be worth mentioning if it did not happen to illustrate the curious energetic simplicity of Browning's character. Macready, who was in desperately low financial circumstances at this time, tried by every means conceivable to avoid playing the part; he dodged, he shuffled, he tried every evasion that occurred to him, but it never occurred to Browning to see what he meant. He pushed off the part upon Phelps, and Browning was contented; he resumed it, and Browning was only

discontented on behalf of Phelps. The two had a quarrel; they were both headstrong, passionate men, but the quarrel dealt entirely with the unfortunate condition of Phelps. Browning beat down his own hat over his eyes; Macready flung Browning's manuscript with a slap upon the floor. But all the time it never occurred to the poet that Macready's conduct was dictated by anything so crude and simple as a desire for money. Browning was in fact by his principles and his ideals a man of the world, but in his life far otherwise. That worldly ease which is to most of us a temptation was to him an ideal. He was as it were a citizen of the New Jerusalem who desired with perfect sanity and simplicity to be a citizen of Mayfair. There was in him a quality which can only be most delicately described; for it was a virtue which bears a strange resemblance to one of the meanest of vices. Those curious people who think the truth a thing that can be said violently and with ease, might naturally call Browning a snob. He was fond of society, of fashion, and even of wealth: but there is no snobbery in admiring these things or any things if we admire them for the right reasons. He admired them as worldlings cannot admire them: he was, as it were, the child who comes in with the dessert. He bore the same relation to the snob that the righteous man bears to the Pharisee: something frightfully close and similar and yet an everlasting opposite.

CHAPTER III

BROWNING AND HIS MARRIAGE

ROBERT BROWNING had his faults, and the general direction of those faults has been previously suggested. The chief of his faults, a certain uncontrollable brutality of speech and gesture when he was strongly roused, was destined to cling to him all through his life, and to startle with the blaze of a volcano even the last quiet years before his death. But any one who wishes to understand how deep was the elemental honesty and reality of his character, how profoundly worthy he was of any love that was bestowed upon him, need only study one most striking and determining element in the question — Browning's simple, heartfelt, and unlimited admiration for other people. He was one of a generation of great men, of great men who had a certain peculiar type, certain peculiar merits and defects. Carlyle, Tennyson, Ruskin, Matthew Arnold, were alike in being children of a very strenuous and conscientious age, alike in possessing its earnestness and air of deciding great matters, alike also in showing a certain almost noble jealousy, a certain restlessness, a certain fear of other influences. Browning alone had no fear; he welcomed, evidently without the least affectation, all the influences of his day. A very interesting letter of his remains in which he describes

his pleasure in a university dinner. "Praise," he says in effect, "was given very deservedly to Matthew Arnold and Swinburne, and to that pride of Oxford men, Clough." The really striking thing about these three names is the fact that they are united in Browning's praise in a way in which they are by no means united in each other's. Matthew Arnold, in one of his extant letters, calls Swinburne "a young pseudo-Shelley," who, according to Arnold, thinks he can make Greek plays good by making them modern. Mr. Swinburne, on the other hand, has summarised Clough in a contemptuous rhyme:—

" There was a bad poet named Clough,
Whom his friends all united to puff,
But the public, though dull,
Has not quite such a skull
As belongs to believers in Clough."

The same general fact will be found through the whole of Browning's life and critical attitude. He adored Shelley, and also Carlyle who sneered at him. He delighted in Mill, and also in Ruskin who rebelled against Mill. He excused Napoleon III. and also Landor who hurled interminable curses against Napoleon. He admired all the cycle of great men who all contemned each other. To say that he had no streak of envy in his nature would be true, but unfair; for there is no justification for attributing any of these great men's opinions to envy. But Browning was really unique, in that he had a certain spontaneous and unthinking tendency to the admiration of others. He admired another poet as he admired a fading sunset or a chance spring leaf. He no more thought whether he could be as good as that man in that department

than whether he could be redder than the sunset or greener than the leaf of spring. He was naturally magnanimous in the literal sense of that sublime word ; his mind was so great that it rejoiced in the triumphs of strangers. In this spirit Browning had already cast his eyes round in the literary world of his time, and had been greatly and justifiably struck with the work of a young lady poet, Miss Barrett.

That impression was indeed amply justified. In a time when it was thought necessary for a lady to dilute the wine of poetry to its very weakest tint, Miss Barrett had contrived to produce poetry which was open to literary objection as too heady and too high-coloured. When she erred it was through an Elizabethan audacity and luxuriance, a straining after violent metaphors. With her reappeared in poetry a certain element which had not been present in it since the last days of Elizabethan literature, the fusion of the most elementary human passion with something which can only be described as wit, a certain love of quaint and sustained similes, or parallels wildly logical, and of brazen paradox and antithesis. We find this hot wit as distinct from the cold wit of the school of Pope, in the puns and buffooneries of Shakespeare. We find it lingering in *Hudibras*, and we do not find it again until we come to such strange and strong lines as these of Elizabeth Barrett in her poem on Napoleon : —

“ Blood fell like dew beneath his sunrise — sooth
But glittered dew-like in the covenanted
And high-rayed light. He was a despot — granted,
But the *αὐτοκράτορας* of his autocratic mouth
Said ‘ Yea ’ i’ the people’s French ! He magnified
The image of the freedom he denied.”

Her poems are full of quaint things, of such things as the eyes in the peacock fans of the Vatican, which she describes as winking at the Italian tricolour. She often took the step from the sublime to the ridiculous: but to take this step one must reach the sublime. Elizabeth Barrett contrived to assert, what still needs but then urgently needed assertion, the fact that womanliness, whether in life or poetry, was a positive thing, and not the negative of manliness. Her verse at its best was quite as strong as Browning's own, and very nearly as clever. The difference between their natures was a difference between two primary colours, not between dark and light shades of the same colour.

Browning had often heard not only of the public, but of the private life of this lady from his father's friend Kenyon. The old man, who was one of those rare and valuable people who have a talent for establishing definite relationships with people after a comparatively short intercourse, had been appointed by Miss Barrett as her "fairy godfather." He spoke much about her to Browning, and of Browning to her, with a certain courtly garrulity which was one of his talents. And there could be little doubt that the two poets would have met long before had it not been for certain peculiarities in the position of Miss Barrett. She was an invalid, and an invalid of a somewhat unique kind, and living beyond all question under very unique circumstances.

Her father, Edward Moulton Barrett, had been a landowner in the West Indies, and thus, by a somewhat curious coincidence, had borne a part in the same social system which stung Browning's father into revolt and renunciation. The part played by Edward

Barrett, however, though little or nothing is known of it, was probably very different. He was a man conservative by nature, a believer in authority in the nation and the family, and endowed with some faculties for making his conceptions prevail. He was an able man, capable in his language of a certain bitter felicity of phrase. He was rigidly upright and responsible, and he had a capacity for profound affection. But selfishness of the most perilous sort, an unconscious selfishness, was eating away his moral foundations, as it tends to eat away those of all despots. His most fugitive moods changed and controlled the whole atmosphere of the house, and the state of things was fully as oppressive in the case of his good moods as in the case of his bad ones. He had, what is perhaps the subtlest and worst spirit of egotism, not that spirit merely which thinks that nothing should stand in the way of its ill-temper, but that spirit which thinks that nothing should stand in the way of its amiability. His daughters must be absolutely at his beck and call, whether it was to be brow-beaten or caressed. During the early years of Elizabeth Barrett's life, the family had lived in the country, and for that brief period she had known a more wholesome life than she was destined ever to know again until her marriage long afterwards. She was not, as is the general popular idea, absolutely a congenital invalid, weak, and almost moribund from the cradle. In early girlhood she was slight and sensitive indeed, but perfectly active and courageous. She was a good horsewoman, and the accident which handicapped her for so many years afterwards happened to her when she was riding. The injury to her spine, how-

ever, will be found, the more we study her history, to be only one of the influences which were to darken those bedridden years, and to have among them a far less important place than has hitherto been attached to it. Her father moved to a melancholy house in Wimpole Street; and his own character growing gloomier and stranger as time went on, he mounted guard over his daughter's sick-bed in a manner compounded of the pessimist and the disciplinarian. She was not permitted to stir from the sofa, often not even to cross two rooms to her bed. Her father came and prayed over her with a kind of melancholy glee, and with the avowed solemnity of a watcher by a deathbed. She was surrounded by that most poisonous and degrading of all atmospheres — a medical atmosphere. The existence of this atmosphere has nothing to do with the actual nature or prolongation of disease. A man may pass three hours out of every five in a state of bad health, and yet regard, as Stevenson regarded, the three hours as exceptional and the two as normal. But the curse that lay on the Barrett household was the curse of considering ill-health the natural condition of a human being. The truth was that Edward Barrett was living emotionally and æsthetically, like some detestable decadent poet, upon his daughter's decline. He did not know this, but it was so. Scenes, explanations, prayers, fury, and forgiveness had become bread and meat for which he hungered; and when the cloud was upon his spirit, he would lash out at all things and every one with the insatiable cruelty of the sentimentalist.

It is wonderful that Elizabeth Barrett was not made

thoroughly morbid and impotent by this intolerable violence and more intolerable tenderness. In her estimate of her own health she did, of course, suffer. It is evident that she practically believed herself to be dying. But she was a high-spirited woman, full of that silent and quite unfathomable kind of courage which is only found in women, and she took a much more cheerful view of death than her father did of life. Silent rooms, low voices, lowered blinds, long days of loneliness, and of the sickliest kind of sympathy, had not tamed a spirit which was swift and headlong to a fault. She could still own with truth the magnificent fact that her chief vice was impatience, "tearing open parcels instead of untying them; looking at the end of books before she had read them was," she said, "incurable with her." It is difficult to imagine anything more genuinely stirring than the achievement of this woman, who thus contrived, while possessing all the excuses of an invalid, to retain some of the faults of a tomboy.

Impetuosity, vividness, a certain absoluteness and urgency in her demands, marked her in the eyes of all who came in contact with her. In after years, when Browning had experimentally shaved his beard off, she told him with emphatic gestures that it must be grown again "that minute." There we have very graphically the spirit which tears open parcels. Not in vain, or as a mere phrase, did her husband after her death describe her as "all a wonder and a wild desire."

She had, of course, lived her second and real life in literature and the things of the mind, and this in a very genuine and strenuous sense. Her mental occupations were not mere mechanical accomplishments almost

as colourless as the monotony they relieved, nor were they coloured in any visible manner by the unwholesome atmosphere in which she breathed. She used her brains seriously; she was a good Greek scholar, and read Æschylus and Euripides unceasingly with her blind friend, Mr. Boyd; and she had, and retained even to the hour of her death, a passionate and quite practical interest in great public questions. Naturally she was not uninterested in Robert Browning, but it does not appear that she felt at this time the same kind of fiery artistic curiosity that he felt about her. He does appear to have felt an attraction, which may almost be called mystical, for the personality which was shrouded from the world by such sombre curtains. In 1845 he addressed a letter to her in which he spoke of a former occasion on which they had nearly met, and compared it to the sensation of having once been outside the chapel of some marvellous illumination and found the door barred against him. In that phrase it is easy to see how much of the romantic boyhood of Browning remained inside the resolute man of the world into which he was to all external appearance solidifying. Miss Barrett replied to his letters with charming sincerity and humour, and with much of that leisurely self-revelation which is possible for an invalid who has nothing else to do. She herself, with her love of quiet and intellectual companionship, would probably have been quite happy for the rest of her life if their relations had always remained a learned and delightful correspondence. But she must have known very little of Robert Browning if she imagined he would be contented with this airy and bloodless tie. At all times of his life he was

sufficiently fond of his own way; at this time he was especially prompt and impulsive, and he had always a great love for seeing and hearing and feeling people, a love of the physical presence of friends, which made him slap men on the back and hit them in the chest when he was very fond of them. The correspondence between the two poets had not long begun when Browning suggested something which was almost a blasphemy in the Barrett household, that he should come and call on her as he would on any one else. This seems to have thrown her into a flutter of fear and doubt. She alleges all kinds of obstacles, the chief of which were her health and the season of the year and the east winds. "If my truest heart's wishes avail," replied Browning, obstinately, "you shall laugh at east winds yet as I do."

Then began the chief part of that celebrated correspondence which has within comparatively recent years been placed before the world. It is a correspondence which has very peculiar qualities and raises many profound questions.

It is impossible to deal at any length with the picture given in these remarkable letters of the gradual progress and amalgamation of two spirits of great natural potency and independence, without saying at least a word about the moral question raised by their publication and the many expressions of disapproval which it entails. To the mind of the present writer the whole of such a question should be tested by one perfectly clear intellectual distinction and comparison. I am not prepared to admit that there is or can be, properly speaking, in the world anything that is too sacred to be known. That spiritual beauty and spiritual truth

are in their nature communicable, and that they should be communicated, is a principle which lies at the root of every conceivable religion. Christ was crucified upon a hill, and not in a cavern, and the word Gospel itself involves the same idea as the ordinary name of a daily paper. Whenever, therefore, a poet or any similar type of man can, or conceives that he can, make all men partakers in some splendid secret of his own heart, I can imagine nothing saner and nothing manlier than his course in doing so. Thus it was that Dante made a new heaven and a new hell out of a girl's nod in the streets of Florence. Thus it was that Paul founded a civilisation by keeping an ethical diary. But the one essential which exists in all such cases as these is that the man in question believes that he can make the story as stately to the whole world as it is to him, and he chooses his words to that end. Yet when a work contains expressions which have one value and significance when read by the people to whom they were addressed, and an entirely different value and significance when read by any one else, then the element of the violation of sanctity does arise. But it is not because there is anything in this world too sacred to tell. It is rather because there are a great many things in this world too sacred to parody. If Browning could really convey to the world the inmost core of his affection for his wife, I see no reason why he should not. But the objection to letters which begin "My dear Ba," is that they do not convey anything of the sort. As far as any third person is concerned, Browning might as well have been expressing the most noble and universal sentiment in the dialect of the Cherokees. Objection to the publication of such passages as that, in short, is not the

fact that they tell us about the love of the Brownings, but that they do not tell us about it.

Upon this principle it is obvious that there should have been a selection among the Letters, but not a selection which should exclude anything merely because it was ardent and noble. If Browning or Mrs. Browning had not desired any people to know that they were fond of each other, they would not have written and published "One Word More" or "The Sonnets from the Portuguese." Nay, they would not have been married in a public church, for every one who is married in a church does make a confession of love of absolutely national publicity, and tacitly, therefore, repudiates any idea that such confessions are too sacred for the world to know. The ridiculous theory that men should have no noble passions or sentiments in public may have been designed to make private life holy and undefiled, but it has had very little actual effect except to make public life cynical and preposterously unmeaning. But the words of a poem or the words of the English Marriage Service, which are as fine as many poems, is a language dignified and deliberately intended to be understood by all. If the bride and bridegroom in church, instead of uttering those words, were to utter a poem compounded of private allusions to the foibles of Aunt Matilda, or of childish secrets which they would tell each other in a lane, it would be a parallel case to the publication of some of the Browning Letters. Why the serious and universal portions of those Letters could not be published without those which are to us idle and unmeaning it is difficult to understand. Our wisdom, whether expressed in private or public, belongs to the world, but our folly belongs to those we love.

There is at least one peculiarity in the Browning Letters which tends to make their publication far less open to objection than almost any other collection of love letters which can be imagined. The ordinary sentimentalist who delights in the most emotional of magazine interviews, will not be able to get much satisfaction out of them, because he and many persons more acute will be quite unable to make head or tail of three consecutive sentences. In this respect it is the most extraordinary correspondence in the world. There seem to be only two main rules for this form of letter-writing: the first is, that if a sentence can begin with a parenthesis it always should; and the second is, that if you have written from a third to half of a sentence you need never in any case write any more. It would be amusing to watch any one who felt an idle curiosity as to the language and secrets of lovers opening the Browning Letters. He would probably come upon some such simple and lucid passage as the following: "I ought to wait, say a week at least, having killed all your mules for you, before I shot down your dogs. . . . But not being Phoibos Apollon, you are to know further that when I *did* think I might go modestly on . . . ὦμοι, let me get out of this slough of a simile, never mind with what dislocated ankles."

What our imaginary sentimentalist would make of this tender passage it is difficult indeed to imagine. The only plain conclusion which appears to emerge from the words is the somewhat curious one — that Browning was in the habit of taking a gun down to Wimpole Street and of demolishing the live stock on those somewhat unpromising premises. Nor will he be any better enlightened if he turns to the reply of Miss

Barrett, which seems equally dominated with the great central idea of the Browning correspondence that the most enlightening passages in a letter consist of dots. She replies in a letter following the above: "But if it could be possible that you should mean to say you would show me. . . . Can it be? or am I reading this 'Attic contraction' quite the wrong way. You see I am afraid of the difference between flattering myself and being flattered . . . the fatal difference. And now you will understand that I should be too overjoyed to have revelations from the Portfolio . . . however incarnated with blots and pen scratches . . . to be able to ask impudently of them now? Is that plain?" Most probably she thought it was.

With regard to Browning himself this characteristic is comparatively natural and appropriate. Browning's prose was in any case the most roundabout affair in the world. Those who knew him say that he would often send an urgent telegram from which it was absolutely impossible to gather where the appointment was, or when it was, or what was its object. This fact is one of the best of all arguments against the theory of Browning's intellectual conceit. A man would have to be somewhat abnormally conceited in order to spend sixpence for the pleasure of sending an unintelligible communication to the dislocation of his own plans. The fact was, that it was part of the machinery of his brain that things came out of it, as it were, backwards. The words "tail foremost" express Browning's style with something more than a conventional accuracy. The tail, the most insignificant part of an animal, is also often the most animated and fantastic. An utterance of Browning is often like a strange animal walking

backwards, who flourishes his tail with such energy that every one takes it for his head. He was in other words, at least in his prose and practical utterances, more or less incapable of telling a story without telling the least important thing first. If a man who belonged to an Italian secret society, one local branch of which bore as a badge an olive-green ribbon, had entered his house, and in some sensational interview tried to bribe or blackmail him, he would have told the story with great energy and indignation, but he would have been incapable of beginning with anything except the question of the colour of olives. His whole method was founded both in literature and life upon the principle of the "ex pede Herculem," and at the beginning of his description of Hercules the foot appears some sizes larger than the hero. It is, in short, natural enough that Browning should have written his love letters obscurely, since he wrote his letters to his publisher and his solicitor obscurely. In the case of Mrs. Browning it is somewhat more difficult to understand. For she at least had, beyond all question, a quite simple and lucent vein of humour, which does not easily reconcile itself with this subtlety. But she was partly under the influence of her own quality of passionate ingenuity or emotional wit of which we have already taken notice in dealing with her poems, and she was partly also no doubt under the influence of Browning. Whatever was the reason, their correspondence was not of the sort which can be pursued very much by the outside public. Their letters may be published a hundred times over, they still remain private. They write to each other in a language of their own, an almost exasperatingly impressionist

language, a language chiefly consisting of dots and dashes and asterisks and italics, and brackets and notes of interrogation. Wordsworth when he heard afterwards of their eventual elopement said with that slight touch of bitterness he always used in speaking of Browning, "So Robert Browning and Miss Barrett have gone off together. I hope they understand each other — nobody else would." It would be difficult to pay a higher compliment to a marriage. Their common affection for Kenyon was a great element in their lives and in their correspondence. "I have a convenient theory to account for Mr. Kenyon," writes Browning, mysteriously, "and his otherwise unaccountable kindness to me." "For Mr. Kenyon's kindness," retorts Elizabeth Barrett, "no theory will account. I class it with mesmerism for that reason." There is something very dignified and beautiful about the simplicity of these two poets vying with each other in giving adequate praise to the old dilettante, of whom the world would never have heard but for them. Browning's feeling for him was indeed especially strong and typical. "There," he said, pointing after the old man as he left the room, "there goes one of the most splendid men living — a man so noble in his friendship, so lavish in his hospitality, so large-hearted and benevolent, that he deserves to be known all over the world as 'Kenyon the Magnificent.'" There is something thoroughly worthy of Browning at his best in this feeling, not merely of the use of sociability, or of the charm of sociability, but of the magnificence, the heroic largeness of real sociability. Being himself a warm champion of the pleasures of society, he saw in Kenyon a kind of poetic genius for the thing, a mission

of superficial philanthropy. He is thoroughly to be congratulated on the fact that he had grasped the great but now neglected truth, that a man may actually be great, yet not in the least able.

Browning's desire to meet Miss Barrett was received on her side, as has been stated, with a variety of objections. The chief of these was the strangely feminine and irrational reason that she was not worth seeing, a point on which the seeker for an interview might be permitted to form his own opinion. "There is nothing to see in me nor to hear in me.—I never learned to talk as you do in London; although I can admire that brightness of carved speech in Mr. Kenyon and others. If my poetry is worth anything to any eye, it is the flower of me. I have lived most and been most happy in it, and so it has all my colours. The rest of me is nothing but a root fit for the ground and dark." The substance of Browning's reply was to the effect, "I will call at two on Tuesday."

They met on May 20, 1845. A short time afterwards he had fallen in love with her and made her an offer of marriage. To a person in the domestic atmosphere of the Barretts, the incident would appear to have been paralysing. "I will tell you what I once said in jest," she writes, "if a prince of El Dorado should come with a pedigree of lineal descent from some signory in the moon in one hand and a ticket of good behaviour from the nearest Independent chapel in the other! — 'Why, even *then*,' said my sister Arabel, 'it would not *do*.' And she was right; we all agreed that she was right."

This may be taken as a fairly accurate description of the real state of Mr. Barrett's mind on one subject.

It is illustrative of the very best and breeziest side of Elizabeth Barrett's character that she could be so genuinely humorous over so tragic a condition of the human mind.

Browning's proposals were, of course, as matters stood, of a character to dismay and repel all those who surrounded Elizabeth Barrett. It was not wholly a matter of the fancies of her father. The whole of her family, and most probably the majority of her medical advisers, did seriously believe at this time that she was unfit to be moved, to say nothing of being married, and that a life passed between a bed and a sofa, and avoiding too frequent and abrupt transitions even from one to the other, was the only life she could expect on this earth. Almost alone in holding another opinion and in urging her to a more vigorous view of her condition, stood Browning himself. "But you are better," he would say; "you look so and speak so." Which of the two opinions was right is, of course, a complex medical matter into which a book like this has neither the right nor the need to enter. But this much may be stated as a mere question of fact. In the summer of 1846 Elizabeth Barrett was still living under the great family convention which provided her with nothing but an elegant deathbed, forbidden to move, forbidden to see proper daylight, forbidden to receive a friend lest the shock should destroy her suddenly. A year or two later, in Italy, as Mrs. Browning, she was being dragged up hill in a wine hamper, toiling up to the crests of mountains at four o'clock in the morning, riding for five miles on a donkey to what she calls "an inaccessible volcanic ground not far from the stars." It is perfectly incredible that any one so ill as her family believed her to

be should have lived this life for twenty-four hours. Something must be allowed for the intoxication of a new tie and a new interest in life. But such exaltations can in their nature hardly last a month, and Mrs. Browning lived for fifteen years afterwards in infinitely better health than she had ever known before. In the light of modern knowledge it is not very difficult or very presumptuous of us, to guess that she had been in her father's house to some extent inoculated with hysteria, that strange affliction which some people speak of as if it meant the absence of disease, but which is in truth the most terrible of all diseases. It must be remembered that in 1846 little or nothing was known of spine complaints such as that from which Elizabeth Barrett suffered, less still of the nervous conditions they create, and least of all of hysterical phenomena. In our day she would have been ordered air and sunlight and activity, and all the things the mere idea of which chilled the Barretts with terror. In our day, in short, it would have been recognised that she was in the clutch of a form of neurosis which exhibits every fact of a disease except its origin, that strange possession which makes the body itself a hypocrite. Those who surrounded Miss Barrett knew nothing of this, and Browning knew nothing of it; and probably if he knew anything, knew less than they did. Mrs. Orr says, probably with a great deal of truth, that of ill-health and its sensations he remained "pathetically ignorant" to his dying day. But devoid as he was alike of expert knowledge and personal experience, without a shadow of medical authority, almost without anything that can be formally called a right to his opinion, he was, and remained,

right. He at least saw, he indeed alone saw, to the practical centre of the situation. He did not know anything about hysteria or neurosis, or the influence of surroundings, but he knew that the atmosphere of Mr. Barrett's house was not a fit thing for any human being, alive, dying, or dead. His stand upon this matter has really a certain human interest, since it is an example of a thing which will from time to time occur, the interposition of the average man to the confounding of the experts. Experts are undoubtedly right nine times out of ten, but the tenth time comes, and we find in military matters an Oliver Cromwell who will make every mistake known to strategy and yet win all his battles, and in medical matters a Robert Browning whose views have not a technical leg to stand on and are entirely correct.

But while Browning was thus standing alone in his view of the matter, while Edward Barrett had to all appearance on his side a phalanx of all the sanities and respectabilities, there came suddenly a new development, destined to bring matters to a crisis indeed, and to weigh at least three souls in the balance. Upon further examination of Miss Barrett's condition, the physicians had declared that it was absolutely necessary that she should be taken to Italy. This may, without any exaggeration, be called the turning-point and the last great earthly opportunity of Barrett's character. He had not originally been an evil man, only a man who, being stoical in practical things, permitted himself, to his great detriment, a self-indulgence in moral things. He had grown to regard his pious and dying daughter as part of the furniture of the house and of the universe. And as long as the great mass of authorities

were on his side, his illusion was quite pardonable. His crisis came when the authorities changed their front, and with one accord asked his permission to send his daughter abroad. It was his crisis, and he refused.

He had, if we may judge from what we know of him, his own peculiar and somewhat detestable way of refusing. Once when his daughter had asked a perfectly simple favour in a matter of expediency, permission, that is, to keep her favourite brother with her during an illness, her singular parent remarked that "she might keep him if she liked, but that he had looked for greater self-sacrifice." These were the weapons with which he ruled his people. For the worst tyrant is not the man who rules by fear; the worst tyrant is he who rules by love and plays on it as on a harp. Barrett was one of the oppressors who have discovered the last secret of oppression, that which is told in the fine verse of Swinburne:—

"The racks of the earth and the rods
Are weak as the foam on the sands;
The heart is the prey for the gods,
Who crucify hearts, not hands."

He, with his terrible appeal to the vibrating consciences of women, was, with regard to one of them, very near to the end of his reign. When Browning heard that the Italian journey was forbidden, he proposed definitely that they should marry and go on the journey together.

Many other persons had taken cognisance of the fact, and were active in the matter. Kenyon, the gentlest and most universally complimentary of mortals, had marched into the house and given Arabella Barrett,

the sister of the sick woman, his opinion of her father's conduct with a degree of fire and frankness which must have been perfectly amazing in a man of his almost antiquated social delicacy. Mrs. Jameson, an old and generous friend of the family, had immediately stepped in and offered to take Elizabeth to Italy herself, thus removing all questions of expense or arrangement. She would appear to have stood to her guns in the matter with splendid persistence and magnanimity. She called day after day seeking for a change of mind, and delayed her own journey to the continent more than once. At length, when it became evident that the extraction of Mr. Barrett's consent was hopeless, she reluctantly began her own tour in Europe alone. She went to Paris, and had not been there many days, when she received a formal call from Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who had been married for some days. Her astonishment is rather a picturesque thing to think about.

The manner in which this sensational elopement, which was, of course, the talk of the whole literary world, had been effected, is narrated as every one knows, in the Browning Letters. Browning had decided that an immediate marriage was the only solution; and having put his hand to the plough, did not decline even when it became obviously necessary that it should be a secret marriage. To a man of his somewhat stormily candid and casual disposition this necessity of secrecy was really exasperating; but every one with any imagination or chivalry will rejoice that he accepted the evil conditions. He had always had the courage to tell the truth; and now it was demanded of him to have the greater courage to tell a lie, and he told

it with perfect cheerfulness and lucidity. In thus disappearing surreptitiously with an invalid woman he was doing something against which there were undoubtedly a hundred things to be said, only it happened that the most cogent and important thing of all was to be said for it.

It is very amusing, and very significant in the matter of Browning's character, to read the accounts which he writes to Elizabeth Barrett of his attitude towards the approaching *coup de théâtre*. In one place he says, suggestively enough, that he does not in the least trouble about the disapproval of her father; the man whom he fears as a frustrating influence is Kenyon. Mr. Barrett could only walk into the room and fly into a passion; and this Browning could have received with perfect equanimity. "But," he says, "if Kenyon knows of the matter, I shall have the kindest and friendliest of explanations (with his arm on my shoulder) of how I am ruining your social position, destroying your health, etc., etc." This touch is very suggestive of the power of the old worldling, who could manœuvre with young people as well as Major Pendennis. Kenyon had indeed long been perfectly aware of the way in which things were going; and the method he adopted in order to comment on it is rather entertaining. In a conversation with Elizabeth Barrett, he asked carelessly whether there was anything between her sister and a certain Captain Cooke. On receiving a surprised reply in the negative, he remarked apologetically that he had been misled into the idea by the gentleman calling so often at the house. Elizabeth Barrett knew perfectly well what he meant; but the logical allusiveness of the attack reminds one of a fragment of some Meredithian comedy.

The manner in which Browning bore himself in this acute and necessarily dubious position is, perhaps, more thoroughly to his credit than anything else in his career. He never came out so well in all his long years of sincerity and publicity as he does in this one act of deception. Having made up his mind to that act, he is not ashamed to name it; neither, on the other hand, does he rant about it, and talk about Philistine prejudices and higher laws and brides in the sight of God, after the manner of the cockney decadent. He was breaking a social law, but he was not declaring a crusade against social laws. We all feel, whatever may be our opinions on the matter, that the great danger of this kind of social opportunism, this pitting of a private necessity against a public custom, is that men are somewhat too weak and self-deceptive to be trusted with such a power of giving dispensations to themselves. We feel that men without meaning to do so might easily begin by breaking a social by-law and end by being thoroughly anti-social. One of the best and most striking things to notice about Robert Browning is the fact that he did this thing considering it as an exception, and that he contrived to leave it really exceptional. It did not in the least degree break the rounded clearness of his loyalty to social custom. It did not in the least degree weaken the sanctity of the general rule. At a supreme crisis of his life he did an unconventional thing, and he lived and died conventional. It would be hard to say whether he appears the more thoroughly sane in having performed the act, or in not having allowed it to affect him.

Elizabeth Barrett gradually gave way under the obstinate and almost monotonous assertion of Brown-

ing that this elopement was the only possible course of action. Before she finally agreed, however, she did something, which in its curious and impulsive symbolism, belongs almost to a more primitive age. The sullen system of medical seclusion to which she had long been subjected has already been described. The most urgent and hygienic changes were opposed by many on the ground that it was not safe for her to leave her sofa and her sombre room. On the day on which it was necessary for her finally to accept or reject Browning's proposal, she called her sister to her, and to the amazement and mystification of that lady asked for a carriage. In this she drove into Regent's Park, alighted, walked on to the grass, and stood leaning against a tree for some moments, looking round her at the leaves and the sky. She then entered the cab again, drove home, and agreed to the elopement. This was possibly the best poem that she ever produced.

Browning arranged the eccentric adventure with a great deal of prudence and knowledge of human nature. Early one morning in September 1846 Miss Barrett walked quietly out of her father's house, became Mrs. Robert Browning in a church in Marylebone, and returned home again as if nothing had happened. In this arrangement Browning showed some of that real insight into the human spirit which ought to make a poet the most practical of all men. The incident was, in the nature of things, almost overpoweringly exciting to his wife, in spite of the truly miraculous courage with which she supported it; and he desired, therefore, to call in the aid of the mysteriously tranquillising effect of familiar scenes and faces. One

trifling incident is worth mentioning which is almost unfathomably characteristic of Browning. It has already been remarked in these pages that he was pre-eminently one of those men whose expanding opinions never alter by a hairsbreadth the actual ground plan of their moral sense. Browning would have felt the same things right and the same things wrong, whatever views he had held. During the brief and most trying period between his actual marriage and his actual elopement, it is most significant that he would not call at the house in Wimpole Street, because he would have been obliged to ask if Miss Barrett was disengaged. He was acting a lie; he was deceiving a father; he was putting a sick woman to a terrible risk; and these things he did not disguise from himself for a moment, but he could not bring himself to say two words to a maidservant. Here there may be partly the feeling of the literary man for the sacredness of the uttered word, but there is far more of a certain rooted traditional morality which it is impossible either to describe or to justify. Browning's respectability was an older and more primeval thing than the oldest and most primeval passions of other men. If we wish to understand him, we must always remember that in dealing with any of his actions we have not to ask whether the action contains the highest morality, but whether we should have felt inclined to do it ourselves.

At length the equivocal and exhausting interregnum was over. Mrs. Browning went for the second time almost on tiptoe out of her father's house, accompanied only by her maid and her dog, which was only just successfully prevented from barking. Before the end of the day in all probability Barrett had discov-

ered that his dying daughter had fled with Browning to Italy.

They never saw him again, and hardly more than a faint echo came to them of the domestic earthquake which they left behind them. They do not appear to have had many hopes, or to have made many attempts at a reconciliation. Elizabeth Barrett had discovered at last that her father was in truth not a man to be treated with; hardly, perhaps, even a man to be blamed. She knew to all intents and purposes that she had grown up in the house of a madman.

CHAPTER IV

BROWNING IN ITALY

THE married pair went to Pisa in 1846, and moved soon afterwards to Florence. Of the life of the Brownings in Italy there is much perhaps to be said in the way of description and analysis, little to be said in the way of actual narrative. Each of them had passed through the one incident of existence. Just as Elizabeth Barrett's life had before her marriage been uneventfully sombre, now it was uneventfully happy. A succession of splendid landscapes, a succession of brilliant friends, a succession of high and ardent intellectual interests, they experienced; but their life was of the kind that if it were told at all, would need to be told in a hundred volumes of gorgeous intellectual gossip. How Browning and his wife rode far into the country, eating strawberries and drinking milk out of the basins of the peasants; how they fell in with the strangest and most picturesque figures of Italian society; how they climbed mountains and read books and modelled in clay and played on musical instruments; how Browning was made a kind of arbiter between two improvising Italian bards; how he had to escape from a festivity when the sound of Garibaldi's hymn brought the knocking of the Austrian police; these are the things of which his life is full, trifling

and picturesque things, a series of interludes, a beautiful and happy story, beginning and ending nowhere. The only incidents, perhaps, were the birth of their son and the death of Browning's mother in 1849.

It is well known that Browning loved Italy; that it was his adopted country; that he said in one of the finest of his lyrics that the name of it would be found written on his heart. But the particular character of this love of Browning for Italy needs to be understood. There are thousands of educated Europeans who love Italy, who live in it, who visit it annually, who come across a continent to see it, who hunt out its darkest picture and its most mouldering carving; but they are all united in this, that they regard Italy as a dead place. It is a branch of their universal museum, a department of dry bones. There are rich and cultivated persons, particularly Americans, who seem to think that they keep Italy, as they might keep an aviary or a hothouse, into which they might walk whenever they wanted a whiff of beauty. Browning did not feel at all in this manner; he was intrinsically incapable of offering such an insult to the soul of a nation. If he could not have loved Italy as a nation, he would not have consented to love it as an old curiosity shop. In everything on earth, from the Middle Ages to the *anœba*, who is discussed at such length in "Mr. Sludge the Medium," he is interested in the life in things. He was interested in the life in Italian art and in the life in Italian politics.

Perhaps the first and simplest example that can be given of this matter is in Browning's interest in art. He was immeasurably fascinated at all times by painting and sculpture, and his sojourn in Italy gave him,

of course, innumerable and perfect opportunities for the study of painting and sculpture. But his interest in these studies was not like that of the ordinary cultured visitor to the Italian cities. Thousands of such visitors, for example, study those endless lines of magnificent Pagan busts which are to be found in nearly all the Italian galleries and museums, and admire them, and talk about them, and note them in their catalogues, and describe them in their diaries. But the way in which they affected Browning is described very suggestively in a passage in the letters of his wife. She describes herself as longing for her husband to write poems, beseeching him to write poems, but finding all her petitions useless because her husband was engaged all day in modelling busts in clay and breaking them as fast as he made them. This is Browning's interest in art, the interest in a living thing, the interest in a growing thing, the insatiable interest in how things are done. Every one who knows his admirable poems on painting—"Fra Lippo Lippi" and "Andrea del Sarto" and "Pictor Ignotus"—will remember how fully they deal with technicalities, how they are concerned with canvas, with oil, with a mess of colours. Sometimes they are so technical as to be mysterious to the casual reader. An extreme case may be found in that of a lady I once knew who had merely read the title of "Pacchiarotto and how he worked in distemper," and thought that Pacchiarotto was the name of a dog, whom no attacks of canine disease could keep from the fulfilment of his duty. These Browning poems do not merely deal with painting; they smell of paint. They are the works of a man to whom art is not what it is to so many of the non-pro-

fessional lovers of art, a thing accomplished, a valley of bones: to him it is a field of crops continually growing in a busy and exciting silence. Browning was interested, like some scientific man, in the obstetrics of art. There is a large army of educated men who can talk art with artists; but Browning could not merely talk art with artists — he could talk shop with them. Personally he may not have known enough about painting to be more than a fifth-rate painter, or enough about the organ to be more than a sixth-rate organist. But there are, when all is said and done, some things which a fifth-rate painter knows which a first-rate art critic does not know; there are some things which a sixth-rate organist knows which a first-rate judge of music does not know. And these were the things that Browning knew.

He was, in other words, what is called an amateur. The word amateur has come by the thousand oddities of language to convey an idea of tepidity; whereas the word itself has the meaning of passion. Nor is this peculiarity confined to the mere form of the word; the actual characteristic of these nameless dilettanti is a genuine fire and reality. A man must love a thing very much if he not only practises it without any hope of fame or money, but even practises it without any hope of doing it well. Such a man must love the toils of the work more than any other man can love the rewards of it. Browning was in this strict sense a strenuous amateur. He tried and practised in the course of his life half a hundred things at which he can never have even for a moment expected to succeed. The story of his life is full of absurd little ingenuities, such as the discovery of a way of making pictures by

roasting brown paper over a candle. In precisely the same spirit of fruitless vivacity, he made himself to a very considerable extent a technical expert in painting, a technical expert in sculpture, a technical expert in music. In his old age, he shows traces of being so bizarre a thing as an abstract police detective, writing at length in letters and diaries his views of certain criminal cases in an Italian town. Indeed, his own *Ring and the Book* is merely a sublime detective story. He was in a hundred things this type of man; he was precisely in the position, with a touch of greater technical success, of the admirable figure in Stevenson's story who said, "I can play the fiddle nearly well enough to earn a living in the orchestra of a penny gaff, but not quite."

The love of Browning for Italian art, therefore, was anything but an antiquarian fancy; it was the love of a living thing. We see the same phenomenon in an even more important matter—the essence and individuality of the country itself.

Italy to Browning and his wife was not by any means merely that sculptured and ornate sepulchre that it is to so many of those cultivated English men and women who live in Italy and enjoy and admire and despise it. To them it was a living nation, the type and centre of the religion and politics of a continent; the ancient and flaming heart of Western history, the very Europe of Europe. And they lived at the time of the most moving and gigantic of all dramas—the making of a new nation, one of the things that makes men feel that they are still in the morning of the earth. Before their eyes, with every circumstance of energy and mystery, was passing the panorama

of the unification of Italy, with the bold and romantic militarism of Garibaldi, the more bold and more romantic diplomacy of Cavour. They lived in a time when affairs of State had almost the air of works of art; and it is not strange that these two poets should have become politicians in one of those great creative epochs when even the politicians have to be poets.

Browning was on this question and on all the questions of continental and English politics a very strong Liberal. This fact is not a mere detail of purely biographical interest, like any view he might take of the authorship of the "Eikon Basilike" or the authenticity of the Tichborne claimant. Liberalism was so inevitably involved in the poet's whole view of existence, that even a thoughtful and imaginative Conservative would feel that Browning was bound to be a Liberal. His mind was possessed, perhaps even to excess, by a belief in growth and energy and in the ultimate utility of error. He held the great central Liberal doctrine, a belief in a certain destiny of the human spirit beyond, and perhaps even independent of, our own sincerest convictions. The world was going right he felt, most probably in his way, but certainly in its own way. The sonnet which he wrote in later years, entitled "Why I am a Liberal," expresses admirably this philosophical root of his politics. It asks in effect how he, who had found truth in so many strange forms after so many strange wanderings, can be expected to stifle with horror the eccentricities of others. A Liberal may be defined approximately as a man who, if he could, by waving his hand in a dark room, stop the mouths of all the deceivers of mankind

for ever, would not wave his hand. Browning was a Liberal in this sense.

And just as the great Liberal movement which followed the French Revolution made this claim for the liberty and personality of human beings, so it made it for the liberty and personality of nations. It attached indeed to the independence of a nation something of the same wholly transcendental sanctity which humanity has in all legal systems attached to the life of a man. The grounds were indeed much the same; no one could say absolutely that a live man was useless, and no one could say absolutely that a variety of national life was useless or must remain useless to the world. Men remembered how often barbarous tribes or strange and alien Scriptures had been called in to revive the blood of decaying empires and civilisations. And this sense of the personality of a nation, as distinct from the personalities of all other nations, did not involve in the case of these old Liberals international bitterness; for it is too often forgotten that friendship demands independence and equality fully as much as war. But in them it led to great international partialities, to a great system, as it were, of adopted countries which made so thorough a Scotchman as Carlyle in love with Germany, and so thorough an Englishman as Browning in love with Italy.

And while on the one side of the struggle was this great ideal of energy and variety, on the other side was something which we now find it difficult to realise or describe. We have seen in our own time a great reaction in favour of monarchy, aristocracy, and ecclesiasticism, a reaction almost entirely noble in its instinct, and dwelling almost entirely on the best periods

and the best qualities of the old *régime*. But the modern man, full of admiration for the great virtue of chivalry which is at the heart of aristocracies, and the great virtue of reverence which is at the heart of ceremonial religion, is not in a position to form any idea of how profoundly unchivalrous, how astonishingly irreverent, how utterly mean, and material, and devoid of mystery or sentiment were the despotic systems of Europe which survived, and for a time conquered, the Revolution. The case against the Church in Italy in the time of Pio Nono was not the case which a rationalist would urge against the Church of the time of St. Louis, but diametrically the opposite case. Against the mediæval Church it might be said that she was too fantastic, too visionary, too dogmatic about the destiny of man, too indifferent to all things but the devotional side of the soul. Against the Church of Pio Nono the main thing to be said was that it was simply and supremely cynical; that it was not founded on the unworldly instinct for distorting life, but on the worldly counsel to leave life as it is; that it was not the inspirer of insane hopes, of reward and miracle, but the enemy, the cool and sceptical enemy, of hope of any kind or description. The same was true of the monarchical systems of Prussia and Austria and Russia at this time. Their philosophy was not the philosophy of the cavaliers who rode after Charles I. or Louis XIII. It was the philosophy of the typical city uncle, advising every one, and especially the young, to avoid enthusiasm, to avoid beauty, to regard life as a machine, dependent only upon the two forces of comfort and fear. That was, there can be little doubt, the real reason of the fascination of the Napoleon legend — that

while Napoleon was a despot like the rest, he was a despot who went somewhere and did something, and defied the pessimism of Europe, and erased the word "impossible." One does not need to be a Bonapartist to rejoice at the way in which the armies of the First Empire, shouting their songs and jesting with their colonels, smote and broke into pieces the armies of Prussia and Austria driven into battle with a cane.

Browning, as we have said, was in Italy at the time of the break-up of one part of this frozen continent of the non-possumus. Austria's hold in the north of Italy was part of that elaborate and comfortable and wholly cowardly and unmeaning compromise, which the Holy Alliance had established, and which it believed without doubt in its solid unbelief would last until the Day of Judgment, though it is difficult to imagine what the Holy Alliance thought would happen then. But almost of a sudden affairs had begun to move strangely, and the despotic princes and their chancellors discovered with a great deal of astonishment that they were not living in the old age of the world, but to all appearance in a very unmanageable period of its boyhood. In an age of ugliness and routine, in a time when diplomatists and philosophers alike tended to believe that they had a list of all human types, there began to appear men who belonged to the morning of the world, men whose movements have a national breadth and beauty, who act symbols and become legends while they are alive. Garibaldi in his red shirt rode in an open carriage along the front of a hostile fort calling to the coachman to drive slower, and not a man dared fire a shot at him. Mazzini poured out upon Europe a new mysticism of humanity and liberty;

and was willing, like some passionate Jesuit of the sixteenth century, to become in its cause either a philosopher or a criminal. Cavour arose with a diplomacy which was more thrilling and picturesque than war itself. These men had nothing to do with an age of the impossible. They have passed, their theories along with them, as all things pass; but since then we have had no men of their type precisely, at once large and real and romantic and successful. Gordon was a possible exception. They were the last of the heroes.

When Browning was first living in Italy, a telegram which had been sent to him was stopped on the frontier and suppressed on account of his known sympathy with the Italian Liberals. It is almost impossible for people living in a commonwealth like ours to understand how a small thing like that will affect a man. It was not so much the obvious fact that a great practical injury was really done to him; that the telegram might have altered all his plans in matters of vital moment. It was, over and above that, the sense of a hand laid on something personal and essentially free. Tyranny like this is not the worst tyranny, but it is the most intolerable. It interferes with men not in the most serious matters, but precisely in those matters in which they most resent interference. It may be illogical for men to accept cheerfully unpardonable public scandals, benighted educational systems, bad sanitation, bad lighting, a blundering and inefficient system of life, and yet to resent the tearing up of a telegram or a postcard; but the fact remains that the sensitiveness of men is a strange and localised thing, and there is hardly a man in the world who would not rather be ruled by despots chosen by lot and live in a city like a mediæval

Ghetto, than be forbidden by a policeman to smoke another cigarette, or sit up a quarter of an hour later; hardly a man who would not feel inclined in such a case to raise a rebellion for a caprice for which he did not really care a straw. Unmeaning and muddle-headed tyranny in small things, that is the thing which, if extended over many years, is harder to bear and hope through than the massacres of September. And that was the nightmare of vexatious triviality which was lying over all the cities of Italy that were ruled by the bureaucratic despotisms of Europe. The history of the time is full of spiteful and almost childish struggles—struggles about the humming of a tune or the wearing of a colour, the arrest of a journey, or the opening of a letter. And there can be little doubt that Browning's temperament under these conditions was not of the kind to become more indulgent, and there grew in him a hatred of the Imperial and Ducal and Papal systems of Italy, which sometimes passed the necessities of Liberalism, and sometimes even transgressed its spirit. The life which he and his wife lived in Italy was extraordinarily full and varied, when we consider the restrictions under which one at least of them had always lain. They met and took delight, notwithstanding their exile, in some of the most interesting people of their time—Ruskin, Cardinal Manning, and Lord Lytton. Browning, in a most characteristic way, enjoyed the society of all of them, arguing with one, agreeing with another, sitting up all night by the bedside of a third.

It has frequently been stated that the only difference that ever separated Mr. and Mrs. Browning was upon the question of spiritualism. That statement must, of

course, be modified and even contradicted if it means that they never differed; that Mr. Browning never thought an Act of Parliament good when Mrs. Browning thought it bad; that Mr. Browning never thought bread stale when Mrs. Browning thought it new. Such unanimity is not only inconceivable, it is immoral; and as a matter of fact, there is abundant evidence that their marriage constituted something like that ideal marriage, an alliance between two strong and independent forces. They differed, in truth, about a great many things, for example, about Napoleon III. whom Mrs. Browning regarded with an admiration which would have been somewhat beyond the deserts of Sir Galahad, and whom Browning with his emphatic Liberal principles could never pardon for the *Coup d'État*. If they differed on spiritualism in a somewhat more serious way than this, the reason must be sought in qualities which were deeper and more elemental in both their characters than any mere matter of opinion. Mrs. Orr, in her excellent *Life of Browning*, states that the difficulty arose from Mrs. Browning's firm belief in psychical phenomena and Browning's absolute refusal to believe even in their possibility. Another writer who met them at this time says, "Browning cannot believe, and Mrs. Browning cannot help believing." This theory, that Browning's aversion to the spiritualist circle arose from an absolute denial of the tenability of such a theory of life and death, has in fact often been repeated. But it is exceedingly difficult to reconcile it with Browning's character. He was the last man in the world to be intellectually deaf to a hypothesis merely because it was odd. He had friends whose opinions covered every description of madness from the French legiti-

mism of De Ripert-Monclar to the Republicanism of Landor. Intellectually he may be said to have had a zest for heresies. It is difficult to impute an attitude of mere impenetrable negation to a man who had expressed with sympathy the religion of "Caliban" and the morality of "Time's Revenges." It is true that at this time of the first popular interest in spiritualism a feeling existed among many people of a practical turn of mind, which can only be called a superstition against believing in ghosts. But, intellectually speaking, Browning would probably have been one of the most tolerant and curious in regard to the new theories, whereas the popular version of the matter makes him unusually intolerant and negligent even for that time. The fact was in all probability that Browning's aversion to the spiritualists had little or nothing to do with spiritualism. It arose from quite a different side of his character—his uncompromising dislike of what is called Bohemianism, of eccentric or slovenly cliques, of those straggling camp followers of the arts who exhibit dubious manners and dubious morals, of all abnormality and of all irresponsibility. Any one, in fact, who wishes to see what it was that Browning disliked need only do two things. First, he should read the *Memoirs* of David Home, the famous spiritualist medium with whom Browning came in contact. These *Memoirs* constitute a more thorough and artistic self-revelation than any monologue that Browning ever wrote. The ghosts, the raps, the flying hands, the phantom voices are infinitely the most respectable and infinitely the most credible part of the narrative. But the bragging, the sentimentalism, the moral and intellectual foppery of the composition is everywhere, culminating perhaps in the disgusting pas-

sage in which Home describes Mrs. Browning as weeping over him and assuring him that all her husband's actions in the matter have been adopted against her will. It is in this kind of thing that we find the roots of the real anger of Browning. He did not dislike spiritualism, but spiritualists. The second point on which any one wishing to be just in the matter should cast an eye, is the record of the visit which Mrs. Browning insisted on making while on their honeymoon in Paris to the house of George Sand. Browning felt, and to some extent expressed, exactly the same aversion to his wife mixing with the circle of George Sand which he afterwards felt at her mixing with the circle of Home. The society was "of the ragged red, diluted with the low theatrical, men who worship George Sand, *à genoux* between an oath and an ejection of saliva." When we find that a man did not object to any number of Jacobites or Atheists, but objected to the French Bohemian poets and to the early occultist mediums as friends for his wife, we shall surely be fairly right in concluding that he objected not to an opinion, but to a social tone. The truth was that Browning had a great many admirably Philistine feelings, and one of them was a great relish for his responsibilities towards his wife. He enjoyed being a husband. This is quite a distinct thing from enjoying being a lover, though it will scarcely be found apart from it. But, like all good feelings, it has its possible exaggerations, and one of them is this almost morbid healthiness in the choice of friends for his wife.

David Home, the medium, came to Florence about 1857. Mrs. Browning undoubtedly threw herself into psychical experiments with great ardour at first, and

Browning, equally undoubtedly, opposed, and at length forbade, the enterprise. He did not do so however until he had attended one *séance* at least, at which a somewhat ridiculous event occurred, which is described in Home's *Memoirs* with a gravity even more absurd than the incident. Towards the end of the proceedings a wreath was placed in the centre of the table, and the lights being lowered, it was caused to rise slowly into the air, and after hovering for some time, to move towards Mrs. Browning, and at length to alight upon her head. As the wreath was floating in her direction, her husband was observed abruptly to cross the room and stand beside her. One would think it was a sufficiently natural action on the part of a man whose wife was the centre of a weird and disturbing experiment, genuine or otherwise. But Mr. Home gravely asserts that it was generally believed that Browning had crossed the room in the hope that the wreath would alight on his head, and that from the hour of its disobliging refusal to do so dated the whole of his goaded and malignant aversion to spiritualism. The idea of the very conventional and somewhat bored Robert Browning running about the room after a wreath in the hope of putting his head into it, is one of the genuine gleams of humour in this rather foolish affair. Browning could be fairly violent, as we know, both in poetry and conversation; but it would be almost too terrible to conjecture what he would have felt and said if Mr. Home's wreath had alighted on his head.

Next day, according to Home's account, he called on the hostess of the previous night in what the writer calls "a ridiculous state of excitement," and told her apparently that she must excuse him if he and his wife

did not attend any more gatherings of the kind. What actually occurred is not, of course, quite easy to ascertain, for the account in Home's *Memoirs* principally consists of noble speeches made by the medium which would seem either to have reduced Browning to a pulverised silence, or else to have failed to attract his attention. But there can be no doubt that the general upshot of the affair was that Browning put his foot down, and the experiments ceased. There can be little doubt that he was justified in this; indeed, he was probably even more justified if the experiments were genuine psychical mysteries than if they were the *hocus-pocus* of a charlatan. He knew his wife better than posterity can be expected to do; but even posterity can see that she was the type of woman so much adapted to the purposes of men like Home as to exhibit almost invariably either a great craving for such experiences or a great terror of them. Like many geniuses, but not all, she lived naturally upon something like a borderland; and it is impossible to say that if Browning had not interposed when she was becoming hysterical she might not have ended in an asylum.

The whole of this incident is very characteristic of Browning; but the real characteristic note in it has, as above suggested, been to some extent missed. When some seven years afterwards he produced "Mr. Sludge the Medium," every one supposed that it was an attack upon spiritualism and the possibility of its phenomena. As we shall see when we come to that poem, this is a wholly mistaken interpretation of it. But what is really curious is that most people have assumed that a dislike of Home's investigations implies

a theoretic disbelief in spiritualism. It might, of course, imply a very firm and serious belief in it. As a matter of fact it did not imply this in Browning, but it may perfectly well have implied an agnosticism which admitted the reasonableness of such things. Home was infinitely less dangerous as a dexterous swindler than he was as a bad or foolish man in possession of unknown or ill-comprehended powers. It is surely curious to think that a man must object to exposing his wife to a few conjuring tricks, but could not be afraid of exposing her to the loose and nameless energies of the universe.

Browning's theoretic attitude in the matter was, therefore, in all probability quite open and unbiassed. His was a peculiarly hospitable intellect. If any one had told him of the spiritualist theory, or theories a hundred times more insane, as things held by some sect of Gnostics in Alexandria, or of heretical Talmudists at Antwerp, he would have delighted in those theories, and would very likely have adopted them. But Greek Gnostics and Antwerp Jews do not dance round a man's wife and wave their hands in her face and send her into swoons and trances about which nobody knows anything rational or scientific. It was simply the stirring in Browning of certain primal masculine feelings far beyond the reach of argument — things that lie so deep that if they are hurt, though there may be no blame and no anger, there is always pain. Browning did not like spiritualism to be mentioned for many years.

Robert Browning was unquestionably a thoroughly conventional man. There are many who think this element of conventionality altogether regrettable and

disgraceful; they have established, as it were, a convention of the unconventional. But this hatred of the conventional element in the personality of a poet is only possible to those who do not remember the meaning of words. Convention means only a coming together, an agreement; and as every poet must base his work upon an emotional agreement among men, so every poet must base his work upon a convention. Every art is, of course, based upon a convention, an agreement between the speaker and the listener that certain objections shall not be raised. The most realistic art in the world is open to realistic objection. Against the most exact and everyday drama that ever came out of Norway it is still possible for the realist to raise the objection that the hero who starts a subject and drops it, who runs out of a room and runs back again for his hat, is all the time behaving in a most eccentric manner, considering that he is doing these things in a room in which one of the four walls has been taken clean away and been replaced by a line of footlights and a mob of strangers. Against the most accurate black-and-white artist that human imagination can conceive it is still to be admitted that he draws a black line round a man's nose, and that that line is a lie. And in precisely the same fashion a poet must, by the nature of things, be conventional. Unless he is describing an emotion which others share with him, his labours will be utterly in vain. If a poet really had an original emotion; if, for example, a poet suddenly fell in love with the buffers of a railway train, it would take him considerably more time than his allotted three-score years and ten to communicate his feelings.

Poetry deals with primal and conventional things — the hunger for bread, the love of woman, the love of children, the desire for immortal life. If men really had new sentiments, poetry could not deal with them. If, let us say, a man did not feel a bitter craving to eat bread ; but did, by way of substitute, feel a fresh, original craving to eat brass fenders or mahogany tables, poetry could not express him. If a man, instead of falling in love with a woman, fell in love with a fossil or a sea-anemone, poetry could not express him. Poetry can only express what is original in one sense — the sense in which we speak of original sin. It is original, not in the paltry sense of being new, but in the deeper sense of being old ; it is original in the sense that it deals with origins.

All artists, who have any experience of the arts, will agree so far, that a poet is bound to be conventional with regard to matters of art. Unfortunately, however, they are the very people who cannot, as a general rule, see that a poet is also bound to be conventional in matters of conduct. It is only the smaller poet who sees the poetry of revolt, of isolation, of disagreement ; the larger poet sees the poetry of those great agreements which constitute the romantic achievement of civilisation. Just as an agreement between the dramatist and the audience is necessary to every play ; just as an agreement between the painter and the spectators is necessary to every picture, so an agreement is necessary to produce the worship of any of the great figures of morality — the hero, the saint, the average man, the gentleman. Browning had, it must thoroughly be realised, a real pleasure in these great agreements, these great conventions. He delighted, with a

true poetic delight, in being conventional. Being by birth an Englishman, he took pleasure in being an Englishman; being by rank a member of the middle class, he took a pride in its ancient scruples and its everlasting boundaries. He was everything that he was with a definite and conscious pleasure—a man, a Liberal, an Englishman, an author, a gentleman, a lover, a married man.

This must always be remembered as a general characteristic of Browning, this ardent and headlong conventionality. He exhibited it pre-eminently in the affair of his elopement and marriage, during and after the escape of himself and his wife to Italy. He seems to have forgotten everything, except the splendid worry of being married. He showed a thoroughly healthy consciousness that he was taking up a responsibility which had its practical side. He came finally and entirely out of his dreams. Since he had himself enough money to live on, he had never thought of himself as doing anything but writing poetry; poetry indeed was probably simmering and bubbling in his head day and night. But when the problem of the elopement arose he threw himself with an energy, of which it is pleasant to read, into every kind of scheme for solidifying his position. He wrote to Monckton Milnes, and would appear to have badgered him with applications for a post in the British Museum. "I will work like a horse," he said, with that boyish note, which, whenever in his unconsciousness he strikes it, is more poetical than all his poems. All his language in this matter is emphatic; he would be "glad and proud," he says, "to have any minor post" his friend could obtain for him. He offered to read for the Bar, and probably be-

gan doing so. But all this vigorous and very creditable materialism was ruthlessly extinguished by Elizabeth Barrett. She declined altogether even to entertain the idea of her husband devoting himself to anything else at the expense of poetry. Probably she was right and Browning wrong, but it was an error which every man would desire to have made.

One of the qualities again which make Browning most charming, is the fact that he felt and expressed so simple and genuine a satisfaction about his own achievements as a lover and husband, particularly in relation to his triumph in the hygienic care of his wife. "If he is vain of anything," writes Mrs. Browning, "it is of my restored health." Later, she adds with admirable humour and suggestiveness, "and I have to tell him that he really must not go telling everybody how his wife walked here with him, or walked there with him, as if a wife with two feet were a miracle in Nature." When a lady in Italy said, on an occasion when Browning stayed behind with his wife on the day of a picnic, that he was "the only man who behaved like a Christian to his wife," Browning was elated to an almost infantile degree. But there could scarcely be a better test of the essential manliness and decency of a man than this test of his vanities. Browning boasted of being domesticated; there are half a hundred men everywhere who would be inclined to boast of not being domesticated. Bad men are almost without exception conceited, but they are commonly conceited of their defects.

One picturesque figure who plays a part in this portion of the Brownings' life in Italy is Walter Savage Landor. Browning found him living with some of his

wife's relations, and engaged in a continuous and furious quarrel with them, which was, indeed, not uncommonly the condition of that remarkable man when living with other human beings. He had the double arrogance which is only possible to that old and stately, but almost extinct blend—the aristocratic republican. Like an old Roman senator, or like a gentleman of the Southern States of America, he had the condescension of a gentleman to those below him, combined with the jealous self-assertiveness of a Jacobin to those above. The only person who appears to have been able to manage him and bring out his more agreeable side was Browning. It is, by the way, one of the many hints of a certain element in Browning which can only be described by the elementary and old-fashioned word goodness, that he always contrived to make himself acceptable and even lovable to men of savage and capricious temperament, of detached and erratic genius, who could get on with no one else. Carlyle, who could not get a bitter taste off his tongue in talking of most of his contemporaries, was fond of Browning. Landor, who could hardly conduct an ordinary business interview without beginning to break the furniture, was fond of Browning. These are things which speak more for a man than many people will understand. It is easy enough to be agreeable to a circle of admirers, especially feminine admirers, who have a peculiar talent for discipleship and the absorption of ideas. But when a man is loved by other men of his own intellectual stature and of a wholly different type and order of eminence, we may be certain that there was something genuine about him, and something far more important than anything intellectual. Men do not like another

man because he is a genius, least of all when they happen to be geniuses themselves. This general truth about Browning is like hearing of a woman who is the most famous beauty in a city, and who is at the same time adored and confided in by all the women who live there.

Browning came to the rescue of the fiery old gentleman, and helped by Seymour Kirkup put him under very definite obligations by a course of very generous conduct. He was fully repaid in his own mind for his trouble by the mere presence and friendship of Landor, for whose quaint and volcanic personality he had a vast admiration, compounded of the pleasure of the artist in an oddity and of the man in a hero. It is somewhat amusing and characteristic that Mrs. Browning did not share this unlimited enjoyment of the company of Mr. Landor, and expressed her feelings in her own humorous manner. She writes, "Dear, darling Robert amuses me by talking of his gentleness and sweetness. A most courteous and refined gentleman he is, of course, and very affectionate to Robert (as he ought to be), but of self-restraint he has not a grain, and of suspicion many grains. What do you really say to dashing down a plate on the floor when you don't like what's on it? Robert succeeded in soothing him, and the poor old lion is very quiet on the whole, roaring softly to beguile the time in Latin *alcaics* against his wife and Louis Napoleon."

One event alone could really end this endless life of the Italian Arcadia. That event happened on June 29, 1861. Robert Browning's wife died, stricken by the death of her sister, and almost as hard (it is a characteristic touch) by the death of Cavour. She died alone

in the room with Browning, and of what passed then, though much has been said, little should be. He, closing the door of that room behind him, closed a door in himself, and none ever saw Browning upon earth again but only a splendid surface.

CHAPTER V

BROWNING IN LATER LIFE

BROWNING'S confidences, what there were of them, immediately after his wife's death, were given to several women-friends ; all his life, indeed, he was chiefly intimate with women. The two most intimate of these were his own sister, who remained with him in all his later years, and the sister of his wife, who seven years afterwards passed away in his presence as Elizabeth had done. The other letters, which number only one or two, referring in any personal manner to his bereavement, are addressed to Miss Haworth and Isa Blagden. He left Florence and remained for a time with his father and sister near Dinard. Then he returned to London and took up his residence in Warwick Crescent. Naturally enough, the thing for which he now chiefly lived was the education of his son, and it is characteristic of Browning that he was not only a very indulgent father, but an indulgent father of a very conventional type: he had rather the chuckling pride of the city gentleman than the educational gravity of the intellectual.

Browning was now famous. "Bells and Pomegranates," "Men and Women," "Christmas Eve," and "Dramatis Personæ" had successively glorified his Italian period. But he was already brooding half-

unconsciously on more famous things. He has himself left on record a description of the incident out of which grew the whole impulse and plan of his greatest achievement. In a passage marked with all his peculiar sense of material things, all that power of writing of stone or metal or the fabric of drapery, so that we seem to be handling and smelling them, he has described a stall for the selling of odds and ends of every variety of utility and uselessness:—

“ picture frames

White through the worn gilt, mirror-sconces chipped,
 Bronze angel-heads once knobs attached to chests,
 (Handled when ancient dames chose forth brocade)
 Modern chalk drawings, studies from the nude,
 Samples of stone, jet, breccia, porphyry
 Polished and rough, sundry amazing busts
 In baked earth, (broken, Providence be praised !)
 A wreck of tapestry proudly-purposed web,
 When reds and blues were indeed red and blue,
 Now offer'd as a mat to save bare feet
 (Since carpets constitute a cruel cost).

* * * * *

Vulgarized Horace for the use of schools,
 ‘ The Life, Death, Miracles of Saint Somebody,
 Saint Somebody Else, his Miracles, Death, and Life ’ —
 With this one glance at the lettered back of which,
 And ‘ Stall,’ cried I; a *lira* made it mine.”

This sketch embodies indeed the very poetry of *débris*, and comes nearer than any other poem has done to expressing the pathos and picturesqueness of a low-class pawnshop. “ This,” which Browning bought for a *lira* out of this heap of rubbish, was, of course, the old Latin record of the criminal case of Guido Franceschini, tried for the murder of his wife Pom-

pilia in the year 1698. And this again, it is scarcely necessary to say, was the ground-plan and motive of *The Ring and the Book*.

Browning had picked up the volume and partly planned the poem during his wife's lifetime in Italy. But the more he studied it, the more the dimensions of the theme appeared to widen and deepen; and he came at last, there can be little doubt, to regard it definitely as his *magnum opus* to which he would devote many years to come. Then came the great sorrow of his life, and he cast about him for something sufficiently immense and arduous and complicated to keep his brain going like some huge and automatic engine. "I mean to keep writing," he said, "whether I like it or not." And thus finally he took up the scheme of the Franceschini story, and developed it on a scale with a degree of elaboration, repetition, and management, and inexhaustible scholarship which was never perhaps before given in the history of the world to an affair of two or three characters. Of the larger literary and spiritual significance of the work, particularly in reference to its curious and original form of narration, I shall speak subsequently. But there is one peculiarity about the story which has more direct bearing on Browning's life, and it appears singular that few, if any, of his critics have noticed it. This peculiarity is the extraordinary resemblance between the moral problem involved in the poem if understood in its essence, and the moral problem which constituted the crisis and centre of Browning's own life. Nothing, properly speaking, ever happened to Browning after his wife's death; and his greatest work during that time was the telling, under alien symbols and the veil

of a wholly different story, the inner truth about his own greatest trial and hesitation. He himself had in this sense the same difficulty as Caponsacchi, the supreme difficulty of having to trust himself to the reality of virtue not only without the reward, but even without the name of virtue. He had, like Caponsacchi, preferred what was unselfish and dubious to what was selfish and honourable. He knew better than any man that there is little danger of men who really know anything of that naked and homeless responsibility seeking it too often or indulging it too much. The conscientiousness of the law-abider is nothing in its terrors to the conscientiousness of the conscientious law-breaker. Browning had once, for what he seriously believed to be a greater good, done what he himself would never have had the cant to deny, ought to be called deceit and evasion. Such a thing ought never to come to a man twice. If he finds that necessity twice, he may, I think, be looked at with the beginning of a suspicion. To Browning it came once, and he devoted his greatest poem to a suggestion of how such a necessity may come to any man who is worthy to live.

As has already been suggested, any apparent danger that there may be in this excusing of an exceptional act is counteracted by the perils of the act, since it must always be remembered that this kind of act has the immense difference from all legal acts — that it can only be justified by success. If Browning had taken his wife to Paris, and she had died in an hotel there, we can only conceive him saying, with the bitter emphasis of one of his own lines, “How should I have borne me, please?” Before and after this event his life was as

tranquil and casual a one as it would be easy to imagine; but there always remained upon him something which was felt by all who knew him in after years — the spirit of a man who had been ready when his time came, and had walked in his own devotion and certainty in a position counted indefensible and almost along the brink of murder. This great moral of Browning, which may be called roughly the doctrine of the great hour, enters, of course, into many poems besides *The Ring and the Book*, and is indeed the main-spring of a great part of his poetry taken as a whole. It is, of course, the central idea of that fine poem, "The Statue and the Bust," which has given a great deal of distress to a great many people because of its supposed invasion of recognised morality. It deals, as every one knows, with a Duke Ferdinand and an elopement which he planned with the bride of one of the Riccardi. The lovers begin by deferring their flight for various more or less comprehensible reasons of convenience; but the habit of shrinking from the final step grows steadily upon them, and they never take it, but die, as it were, waiting for each other. The objection that the act thus avoided was a criminal one is very simply and quite clearly answered by Browning himself. His case against the dilatory couple is not in the least affected by the viciousness of their aim. His case is that they exhibited no virtue. Crime was frustrated in them by cowardice, which is probably the worse immorality of the two. The same idea again may be found in that delightful lyric "Youth and Art," where a successful cantatrice reproaches a successful sculptor with their failure to understand each other in their youth and poverty.

“Each life unfulfilled, you see ;
It hangs still, patchy and scrappy :
We have not sighed deep, laughed free,
Starved, feasted, despaired, — been happy.”

And this conception of the great hour which breaks out everywhere in Browning it is almost impossible not to connect with his own internal drama. It is really curious that this correspondence has not been insisted on. Probably critics have been misled by the fact that Browning in many places appears to boast that he is purely dramatic, that he has never put himself into his work, a thing which no poet, good or bad, who ever lived could possibly avoid doing.

The enormous scope and seriousness of *The Ring and the Book* occupied Browning for some five or six years, and the great epic appeared in the winter of 1868. Just before it was published Smith and Elder brought out a uniform edition of all Browning's works up to that time, and the two incidents taken together may be considered to mark the final and somewhat belated culmination of Browning's literary fame. The years since his wife's death, that had been covered by the writing of *The Ring and the Book*, had been years of an almost feverish activity in that and many other ways. His travels had been restless and continued, his industry immense, and for the first time he began that mode of life which afterwards became so characteristic of him — the life of what is called society. A man of a shallower and more sentimental type would have professed to find the life of dinner-tables and soirées vain and unsatisfying to a poet, and especially to a poet in mourning. But if there is one thing more than another which is stirring and honourable about Browning, it is

the entire absence in him of this cant of dissatisfaction. He had the one great requirement of a poet — he was not difficult to please. The life of society was superficial, but it is only very superficial people who object to the superficial. To the man who sees the marvellousness of all things, the surface of life is fully as strange and magical as its interior; clearness and plainness of life is fully as mysterious as its mysteries. The young man in evening dress, pulling on his gloves, is quite as elemental a figure as any anchorite, quite as incomprehensible, and indeed quite as alarming.

A great many literary persons have expressed astonishment at, or even disapproval of, this social frivolity of Browning's. Not one of these literary people would have been shocked if Browning's interest in humanity had led him into a gambling hell in the Wild West or a low tavern in Paris; but it seems to be tacitly assumed that fashionable people are not human at all. Humanitarians of a material and dogmatic type, the philanthropists and the professional reformers go to look for humanity in remote places and in huge statistics. Humanitarians of a more vivid type, the Bohemian artists, go to look for humanity in thieves' kitchens and the studios of the Quartier Latin. But humanitarians of the highest type, the great poets and philosophers, do not go to look for humanity at all. For them alone among all men the nearest drawing-room is full of humanity, and even their own families are human. Shakespeare ended his life by buying a house in his own native town and talking to the townsmen. Browning was invited to a great many conversaciones and private views, and did not pretend that they bored him. In a letter belonging to this

period of his life he describes his first dinner at one of the Oxford colleges with an unaffected delight and vanity, which reminds the reader of nothing so much as the pride of the boy-captain of a public school if he were invited to a similar function and received a few compliments. It may be indeed that Browning had a kind of second youth in this long-delayed social recognition, but at least he enjoyed his second youth nearly as much as his first, and it is not every one who can do that.

Of Browning's actual personality and presence in this later middle age of his, memories are still sufficiently clear. He was a middle-sized, well set up, erect man, with somewhat emphatic gestures, and, as almost all testimonies mention, a curiously strident voice. The beard, the removal of which his wife had resented with so quaint an indignation, had grown again, but grown quite white, which, as she said when it occurred, was a signal mark of the justice of the gods. His hair was still fairly dark, and his whole appearance at this time must have been very well represented by Mr. G. F. Watts' fine portrait in the National Portrait Gallery. The portrait bears one of the many testimonies which exist to Mr. Watts' grasp of the essential of character, for it is the only one of the portraits of Browning in which we get primarily the air of virility, even of animal virility, tempered but not disguised, with a certain touch of the pallor of the brain-worker. He looks here what he was — a very healthy man, too scholarly to live a completely healthy life.

His manner in society, as has been more than once indicated, was that of a man anxious if anything, to avoid the air of intellectual eminence. Lockhart said

briefly, "I like Browning; he isn't at all like a damned literary man." He was, according to some, upon occasion, talkative and noisy to a fault; but there are two kinds of men who monopolise conversation. The first kind are those who like the sound of their own voice; the second are those who do not know what the sound of their own voice is like. Browning was one of the latter class. His volubility in speech had the same origin as his voluminousness and obscurity in literature—a kind of headlong humility. He cannot assuredly have been aware that he talked people down or have wished to do so. For this would have been precisely a violation of the ideal of the man of the world, the one ambition and even weakness that he had. He wished to be a man of the world, and he never in the full sense was one. He remained a little too much of a boy, a little too much even of a Puritan, and a little too much of what may be called a man of the universe, to be a man of the world.

One of his faults probably was the thing roughly called prejudice. On the question, for example, of table-turning and psychic phenomena he was in a certain degree fierce and irrational. He was not indeed, as we shall see when we come to study "Sludge the Medium," exactly prejudiced against spiritualism. But he was beyond all question stubbornly prejudiced against spiritualists. Whether the medium Home was or was not a scoundrel it is somewhat difficult in our day to conjecture. But in so far as he claimed supernatural powers, he may have been as honest a gentleman as ever lived. And even if we think that the moral atmosphere of Home is that of a man of dubious character, we can still feel that

Browning might have achieved his purpose without making it so obvious that he thought so. Some traces again, though much fainter ones, may be found of something like a subconscious hostility to the Roman Church, or at least a less full comprehension of the grandeur of the Latin religious civilisation than might have been expected of a man of Browning's great imaginative tolerance. Æstheticism, Bohemianism, the irresponsibilities of the artist, the untidy morals of Grub Street and the Latin Quarter, he hated with a consuming hatred. He was himself exact in everything, from his scholarship to his clothes; and even when he wore the loose white garments of the loungeur in Southern Europe, they were in their own way as precise as a dress suit. This extra carefulness in all things he defended against the cant of Bohemianism as the right attitude for the poet. When some one excused coarseness or negligence on the ground of genius, he said, "That is an error: *Noblesse oblige*."

Browning's prejudices, however, belonged altogether to that healthy order which is characterised by a cheerful and satisfied ignorance. It never does a man any very great harm to hate a thing that he knows nothing about. It is the hating of a thing when we do know something about it which corrodes the character. We all have a dark feeling of resistance towards people we have never met, and a profound and manly dislike of the authors we have never read. It does not harm a man to be certain before opening the books that Whitman is an obscene ranter or that Stevenson is a mere trifler with style. It is the man who can think these things after he has read the books who must be in a fair way to mental perdition. Prejudice,

in fact, is not so much the great intellectual sin as a thing which we may call, to coin a word, "postjudice," not the bias before the fair trial, but the bias that remains afterwards. With Browning's swift and emphatic nature the bias was almost always formed before he had gone into the matter. But almost all the men he really knew he admired, almost all the books he had really read he enjoyed. He stands pre-eminent among those great universalists who praised the ground they trod on and commended existence like any other material, in its samples. He had no kinship with those new and strange universalists of the type of Tolstoi who praise existence to the exclusion of all the institutions they have lived under, and all the ties they have known. He thought the world good because he had found so many things that were good in it — religion, the nation, the family, the social class. He did not, like the new humanitarian, think the world good because he had found so many things in it that were bad.

As has been previously suggested, there was something very queer and dangerous that underlay all the good humour of Browning. If one of these idle prejudices were broken by better knowledge, he was all the better pleased. But if some of the prejudices that were really rooted in him were trodden on, even by accident, such as his aversion to loose artistic cliques, or his aversion to undignified publicity, his rage was something wholly transfiguring and alarming, something far removed from the shrill disapproval of Carlyle and Ruskin. It can only be said that he became a savage, and not always a very agreeable or presentable savage. The indecent fury which danced upon

the bones of Edward Fitzgerald was a thing which ought not to have astonished any one who had known much of Browning's character or even of his work. Some unfortunate persons on another occasion had obtained some of Mrs. Browning's letters shortly after her death, and proposed to write a *Life* founded upon them. They ought to have understood that Browning would probably disapprove; but if he talked to them about it, as he did to others, and it is exceedingly probable that he did, they must have thought he was mad. "What I suffer with the paws of these blackguards in my bowels you can fancy," he says. Again he writes: "Think of this beast working away, not deeming my feelings, or those of her family, worthy of notice. It shall not be done if I can stop the scamp's knavery along with his breath." Whether Browning actually resorted to this extreme course is unknown; nothing is known except that he wrote a letter to the ambitious biographer which reduced him to silence, probably from stupefaction.

The same peculiarity ought, as I have said, to have been apparent to any one who knew anything of Browning's literary work. A great number of his poems are marked by a trait of which by its nature it is more or less impossible to give examples. Suffice it to say that it is truly extraordinary that poets like Swinburne (who seldom uses a gross word) should have been spoken of as if they had introduced moral license into Victorian poetry. What the Non-conformist conscience has been doing to have passed Browning is something difficult to imagine. But the peculiarity of this occasional coarseness in his work is this — that it is always used to express a certain whole-

some fury and contempt for things sickly, or ungenerous, or unmanly. The poet seems to feel that there are some things so contemptible that you can only speak of them in pothouse words. It would be idle, and perhaps undesirable, to give examples; but it may be noted that the same brutal physical metaphor is used by his Caponsacchi about the people who could imagine Pompilia impure and by his Shakespeare in "At the Mermaid," about the claim of the Byronic poet to enter into the heart of humanity. In both cases Browning feels, and perhaps in a manner rightly, that the best thing we can do with a sentiment essentially base is to strip off its affectations and state it basely, and that the mud of Chaucer is a great deal better than the poison of Sterne. Herein again Browning is close to the average man; and to do the average man justice, there is a great deal more of this Browningsque hatred of Byronism in the brutality of his conversation than many people suppose.

Such, roughly and as far as we can discover, was the man who, in the full summer and even the full autumn of his intellectual powers, began to grow upon the consciousness of the English literary world about this time. For the first time friendship grew between him and the other great men of his time. Tennyson, for whom he then and always felt the best and most personal kind of admiration, came into his life, and along with him Gladstone and Francis Palgrave. There began to crowd in upon him those honours whereby a man is to some extent made a classic in his lifetime, so that he is honoured even if he is unread. He was made a Fellow of Balliol in 1867, and the homage of the great universities continued thenceforth unceasingly

until his death, despite many refusals on his part. He was unanimously elected Lord Rector of Glasgow University in 1875. He declined owing to his deep and somewhat characteristic aversion to formal public speaking, and in 1877 he had to decline on similar grounds the similar offer from the University of St. Andrews. He was much at the English universities, was a friend of Dr. Jowett, and enjoyed the university life at the age of sixty-three in a way that he probably would not have enjoyed it if he had ever been to a university. The great universities would not let him alone, to their great credit, and he became a D.C.L. of Cambridge in 1879, and a D.C.L. of Oxford in 1882. When he received these honours there were, of course, the traditional buffooneries of the undergraduates, and one of them dropped a red cotton night-cap neatly on his head as he passed under the gallery. Some indignant intellectuals wrote to him to protest against this affront, but Browning took the matter in the best and most characteristic way. "You are far too hard," he wrote in answer, "on the very harmless drolleries of the young men. Indeed, there used to be a regularly appointed jester, 'Filius Terrae' he was called, whose business it was to gibe and jeer at the honoured ones by way of reminder that all human glories are merely gilded baubles and must not be fancied metal." In this there are other and deeper things characteristic of Browning besides his learning and humour. In discussing anything, he must always fall back upon great speculative and eternal ideas. Even in the tomfoolery of a horde of undergraduates he can only see a symbol of the ancient office of ridicule in the scheme of morals. The young men themselves were probably

unaware that they were the representatives of the "Filius Terrae."

But the years during which Browning was thus reaping some of his late laurels began to be filled with incidents that reminded him how the years were passing over him. On June 20, 1866, his father had died, a man of whom it is impossible to think without a certain emotion, a man who had lived quietly and persistently for others, to whom Browning owed more than it is easy to guess, to whom we in all probability mainly owe Browning. In 1868 one of his closest friends, Arabella Barrett, the sister of his wife, died, as her sister had done, alone with Browning. Browning was not a superstitious man; he somewhat stormily prided himself on the contrary; but he notes at this time "a dream which Arabella had of Her, in which she prophesied their meeting in five years," that is, of course, the meeting of Elizabeth and Arabella. His friend Milsand, to whom *Sordello* was dedicated, died in 1886. "I never knew," said Browning, "or ever shall know, his like among men." But though both fame and a growing isolation indicated that he was passing towards the evening of his days, though he bore traces of the progress, in a milder attitude towards things, and a greater preference for long exiles with those he loved, one thing continued in him with unconquerable energy — there was no diminution in the quantity, no abatement in the immense designs of his intellectual output.

In 1871 he produced *Balaustion's Adventure*, a work exhibiting not only his genius in its highest condition of power, but something more exacting even than genius to a man of his mature and changed life, immense investigation, prodigious memory, the thorough

assimilation of the vast literature of a remote civilisation. *Balaustion's Adventure*, which is, of course, the mere framework for an English version of the *Alcestis* of Euripides, is an illustration of one of Browning's finest traits, his immeasurable capacity for a classic admiration. Those who knew him tell us that in conversation he never revealed himself so impetuously or so brilliantly as when declaiming the poetry of others; and *Balaustion's Adventure* is a monument of this fiery self-forgetfulness. It is penetrated with the passionate desire to render Euripides worthily, and to that imitation are for the time being devoted all the gigantic powers which went to make the songs of Pippa and the last agony of Guido. Browning never put himself into anything more powerfully or more successfully; yet it is only an excellent translation. In the uncouth philosophy of Caliban, in the tangled ethics of Sludge, in his wildest satire, in his most feather-headed lyric, Browning was never more thoroughly Browning than in this splendid and unselfish plagiarism. This revived excitement in Greek matters; "his passionate love of the Greek language" continued in him thenceforward till his death. He published more than one poem on the drama of Hellas. *Aristophanes' Apology* came out in 1875, and *The Agamemnon of Æschylus*, another paraphrase, in 1877. All three poems are marked by the same primary characteristic, the fact that the writer has the literature of Athens literally at his fingers' ends. He is intimate not only with their poetry and politics, but with their frivolity and their slang; he knows not only Athenian wisdom, but Athenian folly; not only the beauty of Greece, but even its vulgarity. In fact, a page of *Aristophanes' Apology* is like a page of

Aristophanes, dark with levity and as obscure as a schoolman's treatise, with its load of jokes.

In 1871 also appeared *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau: Saviour of Society*, one of the finest and most picturesque of all Browning's apologetic monologues. The figure is, of course, intended for Napoleon III., whose Empire had just fallen, bringing down his country with it. The saying has been often quoted that Louis Napoleon deceived Europe twice—once when he made it think he was a noodle, and once when he made it think he was a statesman. It might be added that Europe was never quite just to him, and was deceived a third time, when it took him after his fall for an exploded mountebank and nonentity. Amid the general chorus of contempt which was raised over his weak and unscrupulous policy in later years, culminating in his great disaster, there are few things finer than this attempt of Browning's to give the man a platform and let him speak for himself. It is the apologia of a political adventurer, and a political adventurer of a kind peculiarly open to popular condemnation. Mankind has always been somewhat inclined to forgive the adventurer who destroys or re-creates, but there is nothing inspiring about the adventurer who merely preserves. We have sympathy with the rebel who aims at reconstruction, but there is something repugnant to the imagination in the rebel who rebels in the name of compromise. Browning had to defend, or rather to interpret a man, who kidnapped politicians in the night and deluged the Montmartre with blood, not for an ideal, not for a reform, not precisely even for a cause, but simply for the establishment of a *régime*. He did these hideous things not so much that he might

be able to do better ones, but that he and every one else might be able to do nothing for twenty years; and Browning's contention, and a very plausible contention, is that the criminal believed that his crime would establish order and compromise, or, in other words, that he thought that nothing was the very best thing he and his people could do. There is something peculiarly characteristic of Browning in thus selecting not only a political villain, but what would appear the most prosaic kind of villain. We scarcely ever find in Browning a defence of those obvious and easily defended publicans and sinners whose mingled virtues and vices are the stuff of romance and melodrama—the generous rake, the kindly drunkard, the strong man too great for parochial morals. He was in a yet more solitary sense the friend of the outcast. He took in the sinners whom even sinners cast out. He went with the hypocrite and had mercy on the Pharisee.

How little this desire of Browning's, to look for a moment at the man's life with the man's eyes, was understood, may be gathered from the criticisms on *Hohenstiel-Schwangau*, which, says Browning, "the Editor of the *Edinburgh Review* calls my eulogium on the Second Empire, which it is not, any more than what another wiseacre affirms it to be, a scandalous attack on the old constant friend of England. It is just what I imagine the man might, if he pleased, say for himself."

In 1873 appeared *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country*, which, if it be not absolutely one of the finest of Browning's poems, is certainly one of the most magnificently Browningsque. The origin of the name of the poem is probably well known. He was travel-

ling along the Normandy coast, and discovered what he called

“ Meek, hitherto un-Murrayed bathing-places,
Best loved of sea-coast-nook-full Normandy ! ”

Miss Thackeray, who was of the party, delighted Browning beyond measure by calling the sleepy old fishing district “ White Cotton Night-Cap Country.” It was exactly the kind of elfish phrase to which Browning had, it must always be remembered, a quite unconquerable attraction. The notion of a town of sleep, where men and women walked about in night-caps, a nation of somnambulists, was the kind of thing that Browning in his heart loved better than *Paradise Lost*. Some time afterwards he read in a newspaper a very painful story of profligacy and suicide which greatly occupied the French journals in the year 1871, and which had taken place in the same district. It is worth noting that Browning was one of those wise men who can perceive the terrible and impressive poetry of the police-news, which is commonly treated as vulgarity, which is dreadful and may be undesirable, but is certainly not vulgar. From *The Ring and the Book* to *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country* a great many of his works might be called magnificent detective stories. The story is somewhat ugly, and its power does not alter its ugliness, for power can only make ugliness uglier. And in this poem there is little or nothing of the revelation of that secret wealth of valour and patience in humanity which makes real and redeems the revelation of its secret vile-ness in *The Ring and the Book*. It almost looks at first sight as if Browning had for a moment surrendered

the whole of his impregnable philosophical position and admitted the strange heresy that a human story can be sordid. But this view of the poem is, of course, a mistake. It was written in something which, for want of a more exact word, we must call one of the bitter moods of Browning; but the bitterness is entirely the product of a certain generous hostility against the class of morbidities which he really detested, sometimes more than they deserved. In this poem these principles of weakness and evil are embodied to him as the sicklier kind of Romanism, and the more sensual side of the French temperament. We must never forget what a great deal of the Puritan there remained in Browning to the end. This outburst of it is fierce and ironical, not in his best spirit. It says in effect, "You call this a country of sleep, I call it a country of death. You call it 'White Cotton Night-Cap Country'; I call it 'Red Cotton Night-Cap Country.'"

Shortly before this, in 1872, he had published *Fifine at the Fair*, which his principal biographer, and one of his most uncompromising admirers, calls a piece of perplexing cynicism. Perplexing it may be to some extent, for it was almost impossible to tell whether Browning would or would not be perplexing even in a love-song or a post-card. But cynicism is a word that cannot possibly be applied with any propriety to anything that Browning ever wrote. Cynicism denotes that condition of mind in which we hold that life is in its nature mean and arid; that no soul contains genuine goodness, and no state of things genuine reliability. *Fifine at the Fair*, like *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau*, is one of Browning's apologetic soliloquies

—the soliloquy of an epicurean who seeks half-playfully to justify upon moral grounds an infidelity into which he afterwards actually falls. This casuist, like all Browning's casuists, is given many noble outbursts and sincere moments, and therefore apparently the poem is called cynical. It is difficult to understand what particular connection there is between seeing good in nobody and seeing good even in a sensual fool.

After *Fifine at the Fair* appeared the *Inn Album*, in 1875, a purely narrative work, chiefly interesting as exhibiting in yet another place one of Browning's vital characteristics, a pleasure in retelling and interpreting actual events of a sinister and criminal type; and after the *Inn Album* came what is perhaps the most preposterously individual thing he ever wrote, *Of Pacchiarotto, and How He Worked in Distemper*, in 1876. It is impossible to call the work poetry, and it is very difficult indeed to know what to call it. Its chief characteristic is a kind of galloping energy, an energy that has nothing intellectual or even intelligible about it, a purely animal energy of words. Not only is it not beautiful, it is not even clever, and yet it carries the reader away as he might be carried away by romping children. It ends up with a voluble and largely unmeaning malediction upon the poet's critics, a malediction so outrageously good-humoured that it does not take the trouble even to make itself clear to the objects of its wrath. One can compare the poem to nothing in heaven or earth, except to the somewhat humorous, more or less benevolent, and most incomprehensible catalogues of curses and oaths which may be heard from an intoxicated navy. This is the kind of thing, and it goes on for pages:—

“ Long after the last of your number
 Has ceased my front-court to encumber
 While, treading down rose and ranunculus,
 You *Tommy-make-room-for-your-uncle-us* !
 Troop, all of you man or homunculus,
 Quick march ! for Xanthippe, my housemaid,
 If once on your pates she a souse made
 With what, pan or pot, bowl or *skoramis*,
 First comes to her hand — things were more amiss !
 I would not for worlds be your place in —
 Recipient of slops from the basin !
 You, Jack-in-the-Green, leaf-and-twiggishness
 Won't save a dry thread on your priggishness ! ”

You can only call this, in the most literal sense of the word, the brute-force of language.

In spite however of this monstrosity among poems, which gives its title to the volume, it contains some of the most beautiful verses that Browning ever wrote in that style of light philosophy in which he was unequalled. Nothing ever gave so perfectly and artistically what is too loosely talked about as a thrill, as the poem called “Fears and Scruples,” in which a man describes the mystifying conduct of an absent friend, and reserves to the last line the climax —

“ Hush, I pray you !
 What if this friend happen to be — God.”

It is the masterpiece of that excellent but much-abused literary quality Sensationalism.

The volume entitled *Pacchiarotto*, moreover, includes one or two of the most spirited poems on the subject of the poet in relation to publicity — “At the Mermaid,” “House,” and “Shop.”

In spite of his increasing years, his books seemed

if anything to come thicker and faster. Two were published in 1878 — *La Saisiaz*, his great metaphysical poem on the conception of immortality, and that delightfully foppish fragment of the *ancien régime* *The Two Poets of Croisic*. Those two poems would alone suffice to show that he had not forgotten the hard science of theology or the harder science of humour. Another collection followed in 1879, the first series of *Dramatic Idyls*, which contain such masterpieces as “Pheidippides” and “Ivàn Ivànovitch.” Upon its heels, in 1880, came the second series of *Dramatic Idyls*, including “Muléykeh” and “Clive,” possibly the two best stories in poetry, told in the best manner of story-telling. Then only did the marvellous fountain begin to slacken in quantity, but never in quality. “Jocoseria” did not appear till 1883. It contains among other things a cast-back to his very earliest manner in the lyric of “Never the Time and the Place,” which we may call the most light-hearted love-song that was ever written by a man over seventy. In the next year appeared *Ferishtah's Fancies*, which exhibit some of his shrewdest cosmic sagacity, expressed in some of his quaintest and most characteristic images. Here perhaps more than anywhere else we see that supreme peculiarity of Browning — his sense of the symbolism of material trifles. Enormous problems, and yet more enormous answers, about pain, prayer, destiny, liberty, and conscience are suggested by cherries, by the sun, by a melon-seller, by an eagle flying in the sky, by a man tilling a plot of ground. It is this spirit of grotesque allegory which really characterises Browning among all other poets. Other poets might possibly have hit upon the same philo-

sophical idea — some idea as deep, as delicate, and as spiritual. But it may be safely asserted that no other poet having thought of a deep, delicate, and spiritual idea would call it “A Bean Stripe; also Apple Eating.”

Three more years passed, and the last book which Browning published in his lifetime, was *Parleyings with Certain People of Importance in their Day*, a book which consists of apostrophes, amicable, furious, reverential, satirical, emotional, to a number of people of whom the vast majority even of cultivated people have never heard in their lives — Daniel Bartoli, Francis Furini, Gerard de Laresses, and Charles Avison. This extraordinary knowledge of the fulness of history was a thing which never ceased to characterise Browning even when he was unfortunate in every other literary quality. Apart altogether from every line he ever wrote, it may fairly be said that no mind so rich as his ever carried its treasures to the grave. All these later poems are vigorous, learned, and full-blooded. They are thoroughly characteristic of their author. But nothing in them is quite so characteristic of their author as this fact, that when he had published all of them, and was already near to his last day, he turned with the energy of a boy let out of school, and began, of all things in the world, to re-write and improve “Pauline,” the boyish poem that he had written fifty-five years before. Here was a man covered with glory and near to the doors of death, who was prepared to give himself the elaborate trouble of reconstructing the mood, and rebuilding the verses of a long juvenile poem which had been forgotten for fifty years in the blaze of successive victories. It is such things as these which give to Browning an interest of personality which is far beyond

the mere interest of genius. It was of such things that Elizabeth Barrett wrote in one of her best moments of insight — that his genius was the least important thing about him.

During all these later years, Browning's life had been a quiet and regular one. He always spent the winter in Italy and the summer in London, and carried his old love of precision to the extent of never failing day after day throughout the year to leave the house at the same time. He had by this time become far more of a public figure than he had ever been previously, both in England and Italy. In 1881, Dr. Furnivall and Miss E. H. Hickey founded the famous "Browning Society." He became President of the new "Shakespeare Society" and of the "Wordsworth Society." In 1886, on the death of Lord Houghton, he accepted the post of Foreign Correspondent to the Royal Academy. When he moved to De Vere Gardens in 1887, it began to be evident that he was slowly breaking up. He still dined out constantly; he still attended every reception and private view; he still corresponded prodigiously, and even added to his correspondence; and there is nothing more typical of him than that now, when he was almost already a classic, he answered any compliment with the most delightful vanity and embarrassment. In a letter to Mr. George Bainton, touching style, he makes a remark which is an excellent criticism on his whole literary career: "I myself found many forgotten fields which have proved the richest of pastures." But despite his continued energy, his health was gradually growing worse. He was a strong man in a muscular, and ordinarily in a physical sense, but he was also in a certain sense a

nervous man, and may be said to have died of brain-excitement prolonged through a lifetime. In these closing years he began to feel more constantly the necessity for rest. He and his sister went to live at a little hotel in Llangollen, and spent hours together talking and drinking tea on the lawn. He himself writes in one of his quaint and poetic phrases that he had come to love these long country retreats, "another term of delightful weeks, each tipped with a sweet starry Sunday at the little church." For the first time, and in the last two or three years, he was really growing old. On one point he maintained always a tranquil and unvarying decision. The pessimistic school of poetry was growing up all round him; the decadents with their belief that art was only a counting of the autumn leaves were approaching more and more towards their tired triumph and their tasteless popularity. But Browning would not for one instant take the scorn of them out of his voice. "Death, death, it is this harping on death that I despise so much. In fiction, in poetry, French as well as English, and I am told in American also, in art and literature, the shadow of death, call it what you will, despair, negation, indifference, is upon us. But what fools who talk thus! Why, *amico mio*, you know as well as I, that death is life, just as our daily momentarily dying body is none the less alive, and ever recruiting new forces of 'existence. Without death, which is our church-yardy crape-like word for change, for growth, there could be no prolongation of that which we call life. Never say of me that I am dead."

On August 13, 1888, he set out once more for Italy, the last of his innumerable voyages. During his

last Italian period he seems to have fallen back on very ultimate simplicities, chiefly a mere staring at nature. The family with whom he lived kept a fox cub, and Browning would spend hours with it watching its grotesque ways; when it escaped, he was characteristically enough delighted. The old man could be seen continually in the lanes round Asolo, peering into hedges and whistling for the lizards.

This serene and pastoral decline, surely the mildest of slopes into death, was suddenly diversified by a flash of something lying far below. Browning's eye fell upon a passage written by the distinguished Edward Fitzgerald, who had been dead for many years, in which Fitzgerald spoke in an uncomplimentary manner of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Browning immediately wrote the "Lines to Edward Fitzgerald," and set the whole literary world in an uproar. The lines were bitter and excessive to have been written against any man, especially bitter and excessive to have been written against a man who was not alive to reply. And yet, when all is said, it is impossible not to feel a certain dark and indescribable pleasure in this last burst of the old barbaric energy. The mountain had been tilled and forested, and laid out in gardens to the summit; but for one last night it had proved itself once more a volcano, and had lit up all the plains with its forgotten fire. And the blow, savage as it was, was dealt for that great central sanctity — the story of a man's youth. All that the old man would say in reply to every view of the question was, "I felt as if she had died yesterday."

Towards December of 1889 he moved to Venice, where he fell ill. He took very little food; it was

indeed one of his peculiar small fads that men should not take food when they are ill, a matter in which he maintained that the animals were more sagacious. He asserted vigorously that this somewhat singular regimen would pull him through, talked about his plans, and appeared cheerful. Gradually, however, the talking became more infrequent, the cheerfulness passed into a kind of placidity; and without any particular crisis or sign of the end, Robert Browning died on December 12, 1889. The body was taken on board ship by the Venice Municipal Guard, and received by the Royal Italian marines. He was buried in the Poet's Corner of Westminster Abbey, the choir singing his wife's poem, "He giveth His beloved sleep." On the day that he died "Asolando" was published.

CHAPTER VI

BROWNING AS A LITERARY ARTIST

MR. WILLIAM SHARP, in his *Life* of Browning, quotes the remarks of another critic to the following effect: "The poet's processes of thought are scientific in their precision and analysis; the sudden conclusion that he imposes upon them is transcendental and inept."

This is a very fair but a very curious example of the way in which Browning is treated. For what is the state of affairs? A man publishes a series of poems, vigorous, perplexing, and unique. The critics read them, and they decide that he has failed as a poet, but that he is a remarkable philosopher and logician. They then proceed to examine his philosophy, and show with great triumph that it is unphilosophical, and to examine his logic and show with great triumph that it is not logical, but "transcendental and inept." In other words, Browning is first denounced for being a logician and not a poet, and then denounced for insisting on being a poet when they have decided that he is to be a logician. It is just as if a man were to say first that a garden was so neglected that it was only fit for a boys' playground, and then complain of the unsuitability in a boys' playground of rockeries and flower-beds.

As we find, after this manner, that Browning does

not act satisfactorily as that which we have decided that he shall be — a logician — it might possibly be worth while to make another attempt to see whether he may not, after all, be more valid than we thought as to what he himself professed to be — a poet. And if we study this seriously and sympathetically, we shall soon come to a conclusion. It is a gross and complete slander upon Browning to say that his processes of thought are scientific in their precision and analysis. They are nothing of the sort; if they were, Browning could not be a good poet. The critic speaks of the conclusions of a poem as “transcendental and inept”; but the conclusions of a poem, if they are not transcendental, must be inept. Do the people who call one of Browning’s poems scientific in its analysis realise the meaning of what they say? One is tempted to think that they know a scientific analysis when they see it as little as they know a good poem. The one supreme difference between the scientific method and the artistic method is, roughly speaking, simply this — that a scientific statement means the same thing wherever and whenever it is uttered, and that an artistic statement means something entirely different, according to the relation in which it stands to its surroundings. The remark, let us say, that the whale is a mammal, or the remark that sixteen ounces go to a pound, is equally true, and means exactly the same thing whether we state it at the beginning of a conversation or at the end, whether we print it in a dictionary or chalk it up on a wall. But if we take some phrase commonly used in the art of literature — such a sentence, for the sake of example, as “the dawn was breaking” — the matter is quite different. If the

sentence came at the beginning of a short story, it might be a mere descriptive prelude. If it were the last sentence in a short story, it might be poignant with some peculiar irony or triumph. Can any one read Browning's great monologues and not feel that they are built up like a good short story, entirely on this principle of the value of language arising from its arrangement? Take such an example as "Caliban upon Setebos," a wonderful poem designed to describe the way in which a primitive nature may at once be afraid of its gods and yet familiar with them. Caliban in describing his deity starts with a more or less natural and obvious parallel between the deity and himself, carries out the comparison with consistency and an almost revolting simplicity, and ends in a kind of blasphemous extravaganza of anthropomorphism, basing his conduct not merely on the greatness and wisdom, but also on the manifest weaknesses and stupidities of the Creator of all things. Then suddenly a thunderstorm breaks over Caliban's island, and the profane speculator falls flat upon his face —

"Lo ! 'Lieth flat and loveth Setebos !
 'Maketh his teeth meet through his upper lip,
 Will let those quails fly, will not eat this month
 One little mass of whelks, so he may 'scape !"

Surely it would be very difficult to persuade oneself that this thunderstorm would have meant exactly the same thing if it had occurred at the beginning of "Caliban upon Setebos." It does not mean the same thing, but something very different; and the deduction from this is the curious fact that Browning is an artist, and that consequently his processes of thought are not "scientific in their precision and analysis."

No criticism of Browning's poems can be vital, none in the face of the poems themselves can be even intelligible which is not based upon the fact that he was successfully or otherwise a conscious and deliberate artist. He may have failed as an artist, though I do not think so; that is quite a different matter. But it is one thing to say that a man through vanity or ignorance has built an ugly cathedral, and quite another to say that he built it in a fit of absence of mind, and did not know whether he was building a lighthouse or a first-class hotel. Browning knew perfectly well what he was doing; and if the reader does not like his art, at least the author did. The general sentiment expressed in the statement that he did not care about form is simply the most ridiculous criticism that could be conceived. It would be far nearer the truth to say that he cared more for form than any other English poet who ever lived. He was always weaving and modelling and inventing new forms. Among all his two hundred to three hundred poems it would scarcely be an exaggeration to say that there are half as many different metres as there are different poems.

The great English poets who are supposed to have cared more for form than Browning did, cared less at least in this sense — that they were content to use old forms so long as they were certain that they had new ideas. Browning, on the other hand, no sooner had a new idea than he tried to make a new form to express it. Wordsworth and Shelley were really original poets; their attitude of thought and feeling marked without doubt certain great changes in literature and philosophy. Nevertheless, the "Ode on the Intimations of Immortality" is a perfectly normal and traditional ode,

and "Prometheus Unbound" is a perfectly genuine and traditional Greek lyrical drama. But if we study Browning honestly, nothing will strike us more than that he really created a large number of quite novel and quite admirable artistic forms. It is too often forgotten what and how excellent these were. *The Ring and the Book*, for example, is an illuminating departure in literary method — the method of telling the same story several times and trusting to the variety of human character to turn it into several different and equally interesting stories. *Pippa Passes*, to take another example, is a new and most fruitful form, a series of detached dramas connected only by the presence of one fugitive and isolated figure. The invention of these things is not merely like the writing of a good poem — it is something like the invention of the sonnet or the Gothic arch. The poet who makes them does not merely create himself — he creates other poets. It is so in a degree long past enumeration with regard to Browning's smaller poems. Such a pious and horrible lyric as "The Heretic's Tragedy," for instance, is absolutely original, with its weird and almost blood-curdling echo verses, mocking echoes indeed —

"And clipt of his wings in Paris square,
They bring him now to be burned alive.
[*And wanteth there grace of lute or clavicithern,
ye shall say to confirm him who singeth —*
We bring John now to be burned alive."

A hundred instances might, of course, be given. Milton's "Sonnet on his Blindness," or Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn," are both thoroughly original, but still we can point to other such sonnets and other such odes. But can any one mention any poem of exactly the same

structural and literary type as "Fears and Scruples," as "The Householder," as "House" or "Shop," as "Nationality in Drinks," as "Sibrandus Schafnaburgensis," as "My Star," as "A Portrait," as any of "Ferishtah's Fancies," as any of the "Bad Dreams."

The thing which ought to be said about Browning by those who do not enjoy him is simply that they do not like his form; that they have studied the form, and think it a bad form. If more people said things of this sort, the world of criticism would gain almost unspeakably in clarity and common honesty. Browning put himself before the world as a good poet. Let those who think he failed call him a bad poet, and there will be an end of the matter. There are many styles in art which perfectly competent æsthetic judges cannot endure. For instance, it would be perfectly legitimate for a strict lover of Gothic to say that one of the monstrous rococo altar-pieces in the Belgian churches with bulbous clouds and oaken sun-rays seven feet long, was, in his opinion, ugly. But surely it would be perfectly ridiculous for any one to say that it had no form. A man's actual feelings about it might be better expressed by saying that it had too much. To say that Browning was merely a thinker because you think "Caliban upon Setebos" ugly, is precisely as absurd as it would be to call the author of the old Belgian altar-piece a man devoted only to the abstractions of religion. The truth about Browning is not that he was indifferent to technical beauty, but that he invented a particular kind of technical beauty to which any one else is free to be as indifferent as he chooses.

There is in this matter an extraordinary tendency to vague and unmeaning criticism. The usual way of

criticising an author, particularly an author who has added something to the literary forms of the world, is to complain that his work does not contain something which is obviously the speciality of somebody else. The correct thing to say about Maeterlinck is that some play of his in which, let us say, a princess dies in a deserted tower by the sea, has a certain beauty, but that we look in vain in it for that robust geniality, that really boisterous will to live which may be found in *Martin Chuzzlewit*. The right thing to say about *Cyrano de Bergerac* is that it may have a certain kind of wit and spirit, but that it really throws no light on the duty of middle-aged married couples in Norway. It cannot be too much insisted upon that at least three-quarters of the blame and criticism commonly directed against artists and authors falls under this general objection, and is essentially valueless. Authors both great and small are like everything else in existence, upon the whole greatly under-rated. They are blamed for not doing, not only what they have failed to do to reach their own ideal, but what they have never tried to do to reach every other writer's ideal. If we can show that Browning had a definite ideal of beauty and loyally pursued it, it is not necessary to prove that he could have written *In Memoriam* if he had tried.

Browning has suffered far more injustice from his admirers than from his opponents, for his admirers have for the most part got hold of the matter, so to speak, by the wrong end. They believe that what is ordinarily called the grotesque style of Browning was a kind of necessity boldly adopted by a great genius in order to express novel and profound ideas. But this is an entire mistake. What is called ugliness was to

Browning not in the least a necessary evil, but a quite unnecessary luxury, which he enjoyed for its own sake. For reasons that we shall see presently in discussing the philosophical use of the grotesque, it did so happen that Browning's grotesque style was very suitable for the expression of his peculiar moral and metaphysical view. But the whole mass of poems will be misunderstood if we do not realise first of all that he had a love of the grotesque of the nature of art for art's sake. Here, for example, is a short distinct poem merely descriptive of one of those elfish German jugs in which it is to be presumed Tokay had been served to him. This is the whole poem, and a very good poem too —

“Up jumped Tokay on our table,
 Like a pigmy castle-warder,
 Dwarfish to see, but stout and able,
 Arms and accoutrements all in order ;
 And fierce he looked North, then, wheeling South
 Blew with his bugle a challenge to Drouth,
 Cocked his flap-hat with the tosspot-feather,
 Twisted his thumb in his red moustache,
 Jingled his huge brass spurs together,
 Tightened his waist with its Buda sash,
 And then, with an impudence nought could abash,
 Shrugged his hump-shoulder, to tell the beholder,
 For twenty such knaves he would laugh but the bolder :
 And so, with his sword-hilt gallantly jutting,
 And dexter-hand on his haunch abutting,
 Went the little man, Sir Ausbruch, strutting !”

I suppose there are Browning students in existence who would think that this poem contained something pregnant about the Temperance question, or was a marvellously subtle analysis of the romantic movement in Germany. But surely to most of us it is sufficiently

apparent that Browning was simply fashioning a ridiculous knick-knack, exactly as if he were actually moulding one of these preposterous German jugs. Now before studying the real character of this Browningsque style, there is one general truth to be recognised about Browning's work. It is this — that it is absolutely necessary to remember that Browning had, like every other poet, his simple and indisputable failures, and that it is one thing to speak of the badness of his artistic failures, and quite another thing to speak of the badness of his artistic aim. Browning's style may be a good style, and yet exhibit many examples of a thoroughly bad use of it. On this point there is indeed a singularly unfair system of judgment used by the public towards the poets. It is very little realised that the vast majority of great poets have written an enormous amount of very bad poetry. The unfortunate Wordsworth is generally supposed to be almost alone in this; but any one who thinks so can scarcely have read a certain number of the minor poems of Byron and Shelley and Tennyson.

Now it is only just to Browning that his more uncouth effusions should not be treated as masterpieces by which he must stand or fall, but treated simply as his failures. It is really true that such a line as

“Irks fear the crop-full bird, frets doubt the maw-crammed
beast?”

is a very ugly and a very bad line. But it is quite equally true that Tennyson's

“And that good man, the clergyman, has told me words of
peace,”

is a very ugly and a very bad line. But people do not

say that this proves that Tennyson was a mere crabbed controversialist and metaphysician. They say that it is a bad example of Tennyson's form; they do not say that it is a good example of Tennyson's indifference to form. Upon the whole, Browning exhibits far fewer instances of this failure in his own style than any other of the great poets, with the exception of one or two like Spenser and Keats, who seem to have a mysterious incapacity for writing bad poetry. But almost all original poets, particularly poets who have invented an artistic style, are subject to one most disastrous habit—the habit of writing imitations of themselves. Every now and then in the works of the noblest classical poets you will come upon passages which read like extracts from an American book of parodies. Swinburne, for example, when he wrote the couplet—

“From the lilies and languors of virtue
To the raptures and roses of vice,”

wrote what is nothing but a bad imitation of himself, an imitation which seems indeed to have the wholly unjust and uncritical object of proving that the Swinburnian melody is a mechanical scheme of initial letters. Or again, Mr. Rudyard Kipling when he wrote the line—

“Or ride with the reckless seraphim on the rim of a red-
maned star,”

was caricaturing himself in the harshest and least sympathetic spirit of American humour. This tendency is, of course, the result of self-consciousness and theatricality of modern life in which each of us is forced to conceive ourselves as part of a *dramatis personæ* and act perpetually in character. Browning

sometimes yielded to this temptation to be a great deal too like himself.

“ Will I widen thee out till thou turnest
From Margaret Minnikin mou’ by God’s grace,
To Muckle-mouth Meg in good earnest.”

This sort of thing is not to be defended in Browning any more than in Swinburne. But, on the other hand, it is not to be attributed in Swinburne to a momentary exaggeration, and in Browning to a vital æsthetic deficiency. In the case of Swinburne, we all feel that the question is not whether that particular preposterous couplet about lilies and roses redounds to the credit of the Swinburnian style, but whether it would be possible in any other style than the Swinburnian to have written the Hymn to Proserpine. In the same way, the essential issue about Browning as an artist is not whether he, in common with Byron, Wordsworth, Shelley, Tennyson, and Swinburne, sometimes wrote bad poetry, but whether in any other style except Browning’s you could have achieved the precise artistic effect which is achieved by such incomparable lyrics as “The Patriot” or “The Laboratory.” The answer must be in the negative, and in that answer lies the whole justification of Browning as an artist.

The question now arises, therefore, what was his conception of his functions as an artist? We have already agreed that his artistic originality concerned itself chiefly with the serious use of the grotesque. It becomes necessary, therefore, to ask what is the serious use of the grotesque, and what relation does the grotesque bear to the eternal and fundamental elements in life?

One of the most curious things to notice about popular æsthetic criticism is the number of phrases it will be found to use which are intended to express an æsthetic failure, and which express merely an æsthetic variety. Thus, for instance, the traveller will often hear the advice from local lovers of the picturesque, "The scenery round such and such a place has no interest; it is quite flat." To disparage scenery as quite flat is, of course, like disparaging a swan as quite white, or an Italian sky as quite blue. Flatness is a sublime quality in certain landscapes, just as rockiness is a sublime quality in others. In the same way there are a great number of phrases commonly used in order to disparage such writers as Browning which do not in fact disparage, but merely describe them. One of the most distinguished of Browning's biographers and critics says of him, for example, "He has never meant to be rugged, but has become so in striving after strength." To say that Browning never tried to be rugged is like saying that Edgar Allan Poe never tried to be gloomy, or that Mr. W. S. Gilbert never tried to be extravagant. The whole issue depends upon whether we realise the simple and essential fact that ruggedness is a mode of art like gloominess or extravagance. Some poems ought to be rugged, just as some poems ought to be smooth. When we see a drift of stormy and fantastic clouds at sunset, we do not say that the cloud is beautiful although it is ragged at the edges. When we see a gnarled and sprawling oak, we do not say that it is fine although it is twisted. When we see a mountain, we do not say that it is impressive although it is rugged, nor do we say apologetically that it never meant to be rugged, but became so in its striving after strength. Now, to

say that Browning's poems, artistically considered, are fine although they are rugged, is quite as absurd as to say that a rock, artistically considered, is fine although it is rugged. Ruggedness being an essential quality in the universe, there is that in man which responds to it as to the striking of any other chord of the eternal harmonies. As the children of nature, we are akin not only to the stars and flowers, but also to the toadstools and the monstrous tropical birds. And it is to be repeated as the essential of the question that on this side of our nature we do emphatically love the form of the toadstools, and not merely some complicated botanical and moral lessons which the philosopher may draw from them. For example, just as there is such a thing as a poetical metre being beautifully light or beautifully grave and haunting, so there is such a thing as a poetical metre being beautifully rugged. In the old ballads, for instance, every person of literary taste will be struck by a certain attractiveness in the bold, varying, irregular verse —

“He is either himsel' a devil frae hell,
Or else his mother a witch maun be;
I wadna have ridden that wan water
For a' the gowd in Christentie,”

is quite as pleasing to the ear in its own way as

“There's a bower of roses by Bendermeer stream,
And the nightingale sings in it all the night long,”

is in another way. Browning had an unrivalled ear for this particular kind of staccato music. The absurd notion that he had no sense of melody in verse is only possible to people who think that there is no melody in

verse which is not an imitation of Swinburne. To give a satisfactory idea of Browning's rhythmic originality would be impossible without quotations more copious than entertaining. But the essential point has been suggested.

“They were purple of raiment and golden,
Filled full of thee, fiery with wine,
Thy lovers in haunts unbeholden,
In marvellous chambers of thine,”

is beautiful language, but not the only sort of beautiful language. This, for instance, has also a tune in it —

“I — ‘next poet.’ No, my hearties,
I nor am, nor fain would be !
Choose your chiefs and pick your parties,
Not one soul revolt to me !
* * * * *
Which of you did I enable
Once to slip inside my breast,
There to catalogue and label
What I like least, what love best,
Hope and fear, believe and doubt of,
Seek and shun, respect, deride,
Who has right to make a rout of
Rarities he found inside ? ”

This quick, gallantly stepping measure also has its own kind of music, and the man who cannot feel it can never have enjoyed the sound of soldiers marching by. This, then, roughly is the main fact to remember about Browning's poetical method, or about any one's poetical method — that the question is not whether that method is the best in the world, but the question whether there are not certain things which can only be conveyed by

that method. It is perfectly true, for instance, that a really lofty and lucid line of Tennyson, such as —

“Thou wert the highest, yet most human too,”

and

“We needs must love the highest when we see it,”

would really be made the worse for being translated into Browning. It would probably become

“High’s human; man loves best, best visible,”

and would lose its peculiar clarity and dignity and courtly plainness. But it is quite equally true that any really characteristic fragment of Browning, if it were only the tempestuous scolding of the organist in “Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha” —

“Hallo, you sacristan, show us a light there!

Down it dips, gone like a rocket.

What, you want, do you, to come unawares,

Sweeping the church up for first morning-prayers,

And find a poor devil has ended his cares

At the foot of your rotten-runged rat-riddled stairs?

Do I carry the moon in my pocket?”

—it is quite equally true that this outrageous gallop of rhymes ending with a frantic astronomical image would lose in energy and spirit if it were written in a conventional and classical style, and ran —

“What must I deem then that thou dreamest to find

Disjected bones adrift upon the stair

Thou sweepest clean, or that thou deemest that I

Pouch in my wallet the vice-regal sun?”

Is it not obvious that this statelier version might be excellent poetry of its kind, and yet would be bad

exactly in so far as it was good; that it would lose all the swing, the rush, the energy of the preposterous and grotesque original? In fact, we may see how unmanageable is this classical treatment of the essentially absurd in Tennyson himself. The humorous passages in *The Princess*, though often really humorous in themselves, always appear forced and feeble because they have to be restrained by a certain metrical dignity, and the mere idea of such restraint is incompatible with humour. If Browning had written the passage which opens *The Princess*, descriptive of the "larking" of the villagers in the magnate's park, he would have spared us nothing; he would not have spared us the shrill uneducated voices and the unburied bottles of ginger beer. He would have crammed the poem with uncouth similes; he would have changed the metre a hundred times; he would have broken into doggerel and into rhapsody; but he would have left, when all is said and done, as he leaves in that paltry fragment of the grumbling organist, the impression of a certain eternal human energy. Energy and joy, the father and the mother of the grotesque, would have ruled the poem. We should have felt of that rowdy gathering little but the sensation of which Mr. Henley writes —

"Praise the generous gods for giving,
 In this world of sin and strife,
 With some little time for living,
 Unto each the joy of life,"

the thought that every wise man has when looking at a Bank Holiday crowd at Margate.

To ask why Browning enjoyed this perverse and fantastic style most would be to go very deep into his

spirit indeed, probably a great deal deeper than it is possible to go. But it is worth while to suggest tentatively the general function of the grotesque in art generally and in his art in particular. There is one very curious idea into which we have been hypnotised by the more eloquent poets, and that is that nature in the sense of what is ordinarily called the country is a thing entirely stately and beautiful as those terms are commonly understood. The whole world of the fantastic, all things top-heavy, lop-sided, and nonsensical are conceived as the work of man, gargoyles, German jugs, Chinese pots, political caricatures, burlesque epics, the pictures of Mr. Aubrey Beardsley and the puns of Robert Browning. But in truth a part, and a very large part, of the sanity and power of nature lies in the fact that out of her comes all this instinct of caricature. Nature may present itself to the poet too often as consisting of stars and lilies; but these are not poets who live in the country; they are men who go to the country for inspiration and could no more live in the country than they could go to bed in Westminster Abbey. Men who live in the heart of nature, farmers and peasants, know that nature means cows and pigs, and creatures more humorous than can be found in a whole sketch-book of Callot. And the element of the grotesque in art, like the element of the grotesque in nature, means, in the main, energy, the energy which takes its own forms and goes its own way. Browning's verse, in so far as it is grotesque, is not complex or artificial; it is natural and in the legitimate tradition of nature. The verse sprawls like the trees, dances like the dust; it is ragged like the thunder-cloud, it is top-heavy, like the toadstool.

Energy which disregards the standard of classical art is in nature as it is in Browning. The same sense of the uproarious force in things which makes Browning dwell on the oddity of a fungus or a jellyfish makes him dwell on the oddity of a philosophical idea. Here, for example, we have a random instance from "The Englishman in Italy" of the way in which Browning, when he was most Browning, regarded physical nature.

"And pitch down his basket before us,
 All trembling alive
 With pink and gray jellies, your sea-fruit ;
 You touch the strange lumps,
 And mouths gape there, eyes open, all manner
 Of horns and of humps,
 Which only the fisher looks grave at."

Nature might mean flowers to Wordsworth and grass to Walt Whitman, but to Browning it really meant such things as these, the monstrosities and living mysteries of the sea. And just as these strange things meant to Browning energy in the physical world, so strange thoughts and strange images meant to him energy in the mental world. When, in one of his later poems, the professional mystic is seeking in a supreme moment of sincerity to explain that small things may be filled with God as well as great, he uses the very same kind of image, the image of a shapeless sea-beast, to embody that noble conception.

"The Name comes close behind a stomach-cyst,
 The simplest of creations, just a sac
 That's mouth, heart, legs, and belly at once, yet lives
 And feels, and could do neither, we conclude,
 If simplified still further one degree."

(SLUDGE.)

These bulbous, indescribable sea-goblins are the first thing on which the eye of the poet lights in looking on a landscape, and the last in the significance of which he trusts in demonstrating the mercy of the Everlasting.

There is another and but slightly different use of the grotesque, but which is definitely valuable in Browning's poetry, and indeed in all poetry. To present a matter in a grotesque manner does certainly tend to touch the nerve of surprise and thus to draw attention to the intrinsically miraculous character of the object itself. It is difficult to give examples of the proper use of grotesqueness without becoming too grotesque. But we should all agree that if St. Paul's Cathedral were suddenly presented to us upside down we should, for the moment, be more surprised at it, and look at it more than we have done all the centuries during which it has rested on its foundations. Now it is the supreme function of the philosopher of the grotesque to make the world stand on its head that people may look at it. If we say "a man is a man" we awaken no sense of the fantastic, however much we ought to, but if we say, in the language of the old satirist, "that man is a two-legged bird, without feathers," the phrase does, for a moment, make us look at man from the outside and give us a thrill in his presence. When the author of the Book of Job insists upon the huge, half-witted, apparently unmeaning magnificence and might of Behemoth, the hippopotamus, he is appealing precisely to this sense of wonder provoked by the grotesque. "Canst thou play with him as with a bird, canst thou bind him for thy maidens?" he says in an admirable passage. The notion of the hippopotamus as a house-

hold pet is curiously in the spirit of the humour of Browning.

But when it is clearly understood that Browning's love of the fantastic in style was a perfectly serious artistic love, when we understand that he enjoyed working in that style, as a Chinese potter might enjoy making dragons, or a mediæval mason making devils, there yet remains something definite which must be laid to his account as a fault. He certainly had a capacity for becoming perfectly childish in his indulgence in ingenuities that have nothing to do with poetry at all, such as puns, and rhymes, and grammatical structures that only just fit into each other like a Chinese puzzle. Probably it was only one of the marks of his singular vitality, curiosity, and interest in details. He was certainly one of those somewhat rare men who are fierily ambitious both in large things and in small. He prided himself on having written *The Ring and the Book*, and he also prided himself on knowing good wine when he tasted it. He prided himself on re-establishing optimism on a new foundation, and it is to be presumed, though it is somewhat difficult to imagine, that he prided himself on such rhymes as the following in Pacchiarotto: —

“The wolf, fox, bear, and monkey
By piping advice in one key —
That his pipe should play a prelude
To something heaven-tinged not hell-hued,
Something not harsh but docile,
Man-liquid, not man-fossil.”

This writing, considered as writing, can only be regarded as a kind of joke, and most probably Browning considered it so himself. It has nothing at

all to do with that powerful and symbolic use of the grotesque which may be found in such admirable passages as this from "Holy Cross Day":—

" Give your first groan — compunction's at work ;
And soft ! from a Jew you mount to a Turk.
Lo ! Micah — the self-same beard on chin,
He was four times already converted in ! "

This is the serious use of the grotesque. Through it passion and philosophy are as well expressed as through any other medium. But the rhyming frenzy of Browning has no particular relation even to the poems in which it occurs. It is not a dance to any measure; it can only be called the horse-play of literature. It may be noted, for example, as a rather curious fact that the ingenious rhymes are generally only mathematical triumphs, not triumphs of any kind of assonance. "The Pied Piper of Hamelin," a poem written for children, and bound in general to be lucid and readable, ends with a rhyme which it is physically impossible for any one to say:—

"And, whether they pipe us free, from rats or from mice,
If we've promised them aught, let us keep our promise."

This queer trait in Browning, his inability to keep a kind of demented ingenuity even out of poems in which it was quite inappropriate, is a thing which must be recognised, and recognised all the more because as a whole he was a very perfect artist, and a particularly perfect artist in the use of the grotesque. But everywhere when we go a little below the surface in Browning we find that there was something in him perverse and unusual despite all his working normality

and simplicity. His mind was perfectly wholesome, but it was not made exactly like the ordinary mind. It was like a piece of strong wood with a knot in it.

The quality of what can only be called buffoonery which is under discussion is indeed one of the many things in which Browning was more of an Elizabethan than a Victorian. He was like the Elizabethans in their belief in the normal man, in their gorgeous and over-loaded language, above all in their feeling for learning as an enjoyment and almost a frivolity. But there was nothing in which he was so thoroughly Elizabethan, and even Shakespearian, as in this fact, that when he felt inclined to write a page of quite uninteresting nonsense, he immediately did so. Many great writers have contrived to be tedious, and apparently aimless, while expounding some thought which they believed to be grave and profitable; but this frivolous stupidity had not been found in any great writer since the time of Rabelais and the time of the Elizabethans. In many of the comic scenes of Shakespeare we have precisely this elephantine ingenuity, this hunting of a pun to death through three pages. In the Elizabethan dramatists and in Browning it is no doubt to a certain extent the mark of a real hilarity. People must be very happy to be so easily amused.

In the case of what is called Browning's obscurity, the question is somewhat more difficult to handle. Many people have supposed Browning to be profound because he was obscure, and many other people, hardly less mistaken, have supposed him to be obscure because he was profound. He was frequently profound, he was occasionally obscure, but as a matter

of fact the two have little or nothing to do with each other. Browning's dark and elliptical mode of speech, like his love of the grotesque, was simply a characteristic of his, a trick of his temperament, and had little or nothing to do with whether what he was expressing was profound or superficial. Suppose, for example, that a person well read in English poetry but unacquainted with Browning's style were earnestly invited to consider the following verse:—

“Hobbs hints blue — straight he turtle eats.
 Nobbs prints blue — claret crowns his cup.
 Nokes outdares Stokes in azure feats —
 Both gorge. Who fished the murex up?
 What porridge had John Keats?”

The individual so confronted would say without hesitation that it must indeed be an abstruse and indescribable thought which could only be conveyed by remarks so completely disconnected. But the point of the matter is that the thought contained in this amazing verse is not abstruse or philosophical at all, but is a perfectly ordinary and straightforward comment, which any one might have made upon an obvious fact of life. The whole verse of course begins to explain itself, if we know the meaning of the word “murex,” which is the name of a sea-shell, out of which was made the celebrated blue dye of Tyre. The poet takes this blue dye as a simile for a new fashion in literature, and points out that Hobbs, Nobbs, etc., obtain fame and comfort by merely using the dye from the shell; and adds the perfectly natural comment:—

“. . . Who fished the murex up?
 What porridge had John Keats?”

So that the verse is not subtle, and was not meant to be subtle, but is a perfectly casual piece of sentiment at the end of a light poem. Browning is not obscure because he has such deep things to say, any more than he is grotesque because he has such new things to say. He is both of these things primarily, because he likes to express himself in a particular manner. The manner is as natural to him as a man's physical voice, and it is abrupt, sketchy, allusive, and full of gaps. Here comes in the fundamental difference between Browning and such a writer as George Meredith, with whom the Philistine satirist would so often in the matter of complexity class him. The works of George Meredith are, as it were, obscure even when we know what they mean. They deal with nameless emotions, fugitive sensations, subconscious certainties and uncertainties, and it really requires a somewhat curious and unfamiliar mode of speech to indicate the presence of these. But the great part of Browning's actual sentiments, and almost all the finest and most literary of them, are perfectly plain and popular and eternal sentiments. Meredith is really a singer producing strange notes and cadences difficult to follow because of the delicate rhythm of the song he sings. Browning is simply a great demagogue, with an impediment in his speech. Or rather, to speak more strictly, Browning is a man whose excitement for the glory of the obvious is so great that his speech becomes disjointed and precipitate: he becomes eccentric through his advocacy of the ordinary, and goes mad for the love of sanity.

If Browning and George Meredith were each describing the same act, they might both be obscure,

but their obscurities would be entirely different. Suppose, for instance, they were describing even so prosaic and material an act as a man being knocked downstairs by another man to whom he had given the lie, Meredith's description would refer to something which an ordinary observer would not see, or at least could not describe. It might be a sudden sense of anarchy in the brain of the assaulter, or a stupefaction and stunned serenity in that of the object of the assault. He might write, "Wainwood's 'Men vary in veracity,' brought the baronet's arm up. He felt the doors of his brain burst, and Wainwood a swift rushing of himself through air accompanied with a clarity as of the annihilated." Meredith, in other words, would speak queerly because he was describing queer mental experiences. But Browning might simply be describing the material incident of the man being knocked downstairs, and his description would run:—

"What then? 'You lie' and doormat below stairs
Takes bump from back."

This is not subtlety, but merely a kind of insane swiftness. Browning is not like Meredith, anxious to pause and examine the sensations of the combatants, nor does he become obscure through this anxiety. He is only so anxious to get his man to the bottom of the stairs quickly that he leaves out about half the story.

Many, who could understand that ruggedness might be an artistic quality, would decisively, and in most cases rightly, deny that obscurity could under any conceivable circumstances be an artistic quality. But here again Browning's work requires a somewhat more cautious and sympathetic analysis. There is a certain

kind of fascination, a strictly artistic fascination, which arises from a matter being hinted at in such a way as to leave a certain tormenting uncertainty even at the end. It is well sometimes to half understand a poem in the same manner that we half understand the world. One of the deepest and strangest of all human moods, is the mood which will suddenly strike us perhaps in a garden at night, or deep in sloping meadows, the feeling that every flower and leaf has just uttered something stupendously direct and important, and that we have by a prodigy of imbecility not heard or understood it. There is a certain poetic value, and that a genuine one, in this sense of having missed the full meaning of things. There is beauty, not only in wisdom, but in this dazed and dramatic ignorance.

But in truth it is very difficult to keep pace with all the strange and unclassified artistic merits of Browning. He was always trying experiments; sometimes he failed, producing clumsy and irritating metres, top-heavy and over-concentrated thought. Far more often he triumphed, producing a crowd of boldly designed poems, every one of which taken separately might have founded an artistic school. But whether successful or unsuccessful, he never ceased from his fierce hunt after poetic novelty. He never became a conservative. The last book he published in his lifetime, *Parleyings with Certain People of Importance in their Day*, was a new poem, and more revolutionary than *Paracelsus*. This is the true light in which to regard Browning as an artist. He had determined to leave no spot of the cosmos unadorned by his poetry which he could find it possible to adorn. An admirable example can be found in that splendid poem "Childe

Roland to the Dark Tower Came." It is the hint of an entirely new and curious type of poetry, the poetry of the shabby and hungry aspect of the earth itself. Daring poets who wished to escape from conventional gardens and orchards had long been in the habit of celebrating the poetry of rugged and gloomy landscapes, but Browning is not content with this. He insists upon celebrating the poetry of mean landscapes. That sense of scrubbiness in nature, as of a man unshaved, had never been conveyed with this enthusiasm and primeval gusto before.

" If there pushed any ragged thistle-stalk
 Above its mates, the head was chopped ; the bents
 Were jealous else. What made those holes and rents
 In the dock's harsh swarth leaves, bruised as to baulk
 All hope of greenness ? 'tis a brute must walk
 Pashing their life out, with a brute's intents."

This is a perfect realisation of that eerie sentiment which comes upon us, not so often among mountains and water-falls, as it does on some half-starved common at twilight, or in walking down some grey mean street. It is the song of the beauty of refuse ; and Browning was the first to sing it. Oddly enough it has been one of the poems about which most of those pedantic and trivial questions have been asked, which are asked invariably by those who treat Browning as a science instead of a poet, "What does the poem of *Childe Roland* mean ?" The only genuine answer to this is, "What does anything mean ?" Does the earth mean nothing ? Do grey skies and wastes covered with thistles mean nothing ? Does an old horse turned out to graze mean nothing ? If it does, there is but one further truth to be added -- that everything means nothing.

CHAPTER VII

THE RING AND THE BOOK

WHEN we have once realised the great conception of the plan of *The Ring and the Book*, the studying of a single matter from nine different standpoints, it becomes exceedingly interesting to notice what these standpoints are; what figures Browning has selected as voicing the essential and distinct versions of the case. One of the ablest and most sympathetic of all the critics of Browning, Mr. Augustine Birrell, has said in one place that the speeches of the two advocates in *The Ring and the Book* will scarcely be very interesting to the ordinary reader. However that may be, there can be little doubt that a great number of the readers of Browning think them beside the mark and adventitious. But it is exceedingly dangerous to say that anything in Browning is irrelevant or unnecessary. We are apt to go on thinking so until some mere trifle puts the matter in a new light, and the detail that seemed meaningless springs up as almost the central pillar of the structure. In the successive monologues of his poem, Browning is endeavouring to depict the various strange ways in which a fact gets itself presented to the world. In every question there are partisans who bring cogent and convincing arguments for the right side; there are also partisans who bring

cogent and convincing arguments for the wrong side. But over and above these, there does exist in every great controversy a class of more or less official partisans who are continually engaged in defending each cause by entirely inappropriate arguments. They do not know the real good that can be said for the good cause, nor the real good that can be said for the bad one. They are represented by the animated, learned, eloquent, ingenious, and entirely futile and impertinent arguments of Juris Doctor Bottinius and Dominus Hyacinthus de Archangelis. These two men brilliantly misrepresent, not merely each other's cause, but their own cause. The introduction of them is one of the finest and most artistic strokes in *The Ring and the Book*.

We can see the matter best by taking an imaginary parallel. Suppose that a poet of the type of Browning lived some centuries hence and found in some *cause célèbre* of our day, such as the Parnell Commission, an opportunity for a work similar in its design to *The Ring and the Book*. The first monologue, which would be called "Half-London," would be the arguments of an ordinary educated and sensible Unionist who believed that there really was evidence that the Nationalist movement in Ireland was rooted in crime and public panic. The "Other half-London" would be the utterance of an ordinary educated and sensible Home Ruler, who thought that in the main Nationalism was one distinct symptom, and crime another, of the same poisonous and stagnant problem. The "Tertium Quid" would be some detached intellectual, committed neither to Nationalism nor to Unionism, possibly Mr. Bernard Shaw, who would make a very entertaining Browning

monologue. Then of course would come the speeches of the great actors in the drama, the icy anger of Parnell, the shuffling apologies of Pigott. But we should feel that the record was incomplete without another touch which in practice has so much to do with the confusion of such a question. Bottinius and Hyacinthus de Archangelis, the two cynical professional pleaders, with their transparent assumptions and incredible theories of the case, would be represented by two party journalists; one of whom was ready to base his case either on the fact that Parnell was a Socialist or an Anarchist, or an Atheist or a Roman Catholic; and the other of whom was ready to base his case on the theory that Lord Salisbury hated Parnell or was in league with him, or had never heard of him, or anything else that was remote from the world of reality. These are the kind of little touches for which we must always be on the look-out in Browning. Even if a digression, or a simile, or a whole scene in a play, seems to have no point or value, let us wait a little and give it a chance. He very seldom wrote anything that did not mean a great deal.

It is sometimes curious to notice how a critic, possessing no little cultivation and fertility, will, in speaking of a work of art, let fall almost accidentally some apparently trivial comment, which reveals to us with an instantaneous and complete mental illumination the fact that he does not, so far as that work of art is concerned, in the smallest degree understand what he is talking about. He may have intended to correct merely some minute detail of the work he is studying, but that single movement is enough to blow him and all his diplomas into the air. These are the sensa-

tions with which the true Browningite will regard the criticism made by so many of Browning's critics and biographers about *The Ring and the Book*. That criticism was embodied by one of them in the words "the theme looked at dispassionately is unworthy of the monument in which it is entombed for eternity." Now this remark shows at once that the critic does not know what *The Ring and the Book* means. We feel about it as we should feel about a man who said that the plot of *Tristram Shandy* was not well constructed, or that the women in Rossetti's pictures did not look useful and industrious. A man who has missed the fact that *Tristram Shandy* is a game of digressions, that the whole book is a kind of practical joke to cheat the reader out of a story, simply has not read *Tristram Shandy* at all. The man who objects to the Rossetti pictures because they depict a sad and sensuous day-dream, objects to their existing at all. And any one who objects to Browning writing his huge epic round a trumpery and sordid police-case has in reality missed the whole length and breadth of the poet's meaning. The essence of *The Ring and the Book* is that it is the great epic of the nineteenth century, because it is the great epic of the enormous importance of small things. The supreme difference that divides *The Ring and the Book* from all the great poems of similar length and largeness of design is precisely the fact that all these are about affairs commonly called important, and *The Ring and the Book* is about an affair commonly called contemptible. Homer says, "I will show you the relations between man and heaven as exhibited in a great legend of love and war, which shall contain the mightiest of all

mortal warriors, and the most beautiful of all mortal women." The author of the Book of Job says, "I will show you the relations between man and heaven by a tale of primeval sorrows and the voice of God out of a whirlwind." Virgil says, "I will show you the relations of man to heaven by the tale of the origin of the greatest people and the founding of the most wonderful city in the world." Dante says, "I will show you the relations of man to heaven by uncovering the very machinery of the spiritual universe, and letting you hear as I have heard, the roaring of the mills of God." Milton says, "I will show you the relations of man to heaven by telling you of the very beginning of all things, and the first shaping of the thing that is evil in the first twilight of time." Browning says, "I will show you the relations of man to heaven by telling you a story out of a dirty Italian book of criminal trials from which I select one of the meanest and most completely forgotten." Until we have realised this fundamental idea in *The Ring and the Book* all criticism is misleading.

In this Browning is, of course, the supreme embodiment of his time. The characteristics of the modern movements *par excellence* is the apotheosis of the insignificant. Whether it be the school of poetry which sees more in one cowslip or clover top than in forests and waterfalls, or the school of fiction which finds something indescribably significant in the pattern of a hearth-rug, or the tint of a man's tweed coat, the tendency is the same. Maeterlinck stricken still and wondering by a deal door half open, or the light shining out of a window at night; Zola filling notebooks with the medical significance of the twitching

of a man's toes, or the loss of his appetite; Whitman counting the grass and the heart-shaped leaves of the lilac; Mr. George Gissing lingering fondly over the third-class ticket and the dilapidated umbrella; George Meredith seeing a soul's tragedy in a phrase at the dinner-table; Mr. Bernard Shaw filling three pages with stage directions to describe a parlour; all these men, different in every other particular, are alike in this, that they have ceased to believe certain things to be important and the rest to be unimportant. Significance is to them a wild thing that may leap upon them from any hiding-place. They have all become terribly impressed with, and a little bit alarmed at, the mysterious powers of small things. Their difference from the old epic poets is the whole difference between an age that fought with dragons and an age that fights with microbes.

This tide of the importance of small things is flowing so steadily around us upon every side to-day, that we do not sufficiently realise that if there was one man in English literary history who might with justice be called its fountain and origin, that man was Robert Browning. When Browning arose, literature was entirely in the hands of the Tennysonian poet. The Tennysonian poet does indeed mention trivialities, but he mentions them when he wishes to speak trivially; Browning mentions trivialities when he wishes to speak sensationally. Now this sense of the terrible importance of detail was a sense which may be said to have possessed Browning in the emphatic manner of a demoniac possession. Sane as he was, this one feeling might have driven him to a condition not far

from madness. Any room that he was sitting in glared at him with innumerable eyes and mouths gaping with a story. There was sometimes no background and no middle distance in his mind. A human face and the pattern on the wall behind it came forward with equally aggressive clearness. It may be repeated, that if ever he who had the strongest head in the world had gone mad, it would have been through this turbulent democracy of things. If he looked at a porcelain vase or an old hat, a cabbage, or a puppy at play, each began to be bewitched with the spell of a kind of fairyland of philosophers: the vase, like the jar in the *Arabian Nights*, to send up a smoke of thoughts and shapes; the hat to produce souls, as a conjurer's hat produces rabbits; the cabbage to swell and overshadow the earth, like the Tree of Knowledge; and the puppy to go off at a scamper along the road to the end of the world. Any one who has read Browning's longer poems knows how constantly a simile or figure of speech is selected, not among the large, well-recognised figures common in poetry, but from some dusty corner of experience, and how often it is characterised by smallness and a certain quaint exactitude which could not have been found in any more usual example. Thus, for instance, *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau* explains the psychological meaning of all his restless and unscrupulous activities by comparing them to the impulse which has just led him, even in the act of talking, to draw a black line on the blotting-paper exactly, so as to connect two separate blots that were already there. This queer example is selected as the best possible instance of a certain fundamental restlessness and

desire to add a touch to things in the spirit of man. I have no doubt whatever that Browning thought of the idea after doing the thing himself, and sat in a philosophical trance staring at a piece of inked blotting-paper, conscious that at that moment, and in that insignificant act, some immemorial monster of the mind, nameless from the beginning of the world, had risen to the surface of the spiritual sea.

It is therefore the very essence of Browning's genius, and the very essence of *The Ring and the Book*, that it should be the enormous multiplication of a small theme. It is the extreme of idle criticism to complain that the story is a current and sordid story, for the whole object of the poem is to show what infinities of spiritual good and evil a current and sordid story may contain. When once this is realised, it explains at one stroke the innumerable facts about the work. It explains, for example, Browning's detailed and picturesque account of the glorious dust-bin of odds and ends for sale, out of which he picked the printed record of the trial, and his insistence on its cheapness, its dustiness, its yellow leaves, and its crabbed Latin. The more soiled and dark and insignificant he can make the text appear, the better for his ample and gigantic sermon. It explains again the strictness with which Browning adhered to the facts of the forgotten intrigue. He was playing the game of seeing how much was really involved in one paltry fragment of fact. To have introduced large quantities of fiction would not have been sportsmanlike. *The Ring and the Book* therefore, to re-capitulate the view arrived at so far, is the typical epic of our age, because it expresses the richness of life by taking as a text

a poor story. It pays to existence the highest of all possible compliments—the great compliment which monarchy paid to mankind—the compliment of selecting from it almost at random.

But this is only the first half of the claim of *The Ring and the Book* to be the typical epic of modern times. The second half of that claim, the second respect in which the work is representative of all modern development, requires somewhat more careful statement. *The Ring and the Book* is of course, essentially speaking, a detective story. Its difference from the ordinary detective story is that it seeks to establish, not the centre of criminal guilt, but the centre of spiritual guilt. But it has exactly the same kind of exciting quality that a detective story has, and a very excellent quality it is. But the element which is important, and which now requires pointing out, is the method by which that centre of spiritual guilt and the corresponding centre of spiritual rectitude is discovered. In order to make clear the peculiar character of this method, it is necessary to begin rather nearer the beginning, and to go back some little way in literary history.

I do not know whether anybody, including the editor himself, has ever noticed a peculiar coincidence which may be found in the arrangement of the lyrics in Sir Francis Palgrave's *Golden Treasury*. However that may be, two poems, each of them extremely well known, are placed side by side, and their juxtaposition represents one vast revolution in the poetical manner of looking at things. The first is Goldsmith's almost too well known

“ When lovely woman stoops to folly,
And finds too late that men betray,
What charm can soothe her melancholy?
What art can wash her guilt away ? ”

Immediately afterwards comes, with a sudden and thrilling change of note, the voice of Burns : —

“ Ye banks and braes o’ bonnie Doon,
How can ye bloom sae fair?
How can ye chant, ye little birds,
And I sae fu’ of care ?
“ Thou’l break my heart, thou bonny bird,
That sings upon the bough,
Thou minds me of the happy days
When my fause Love was true.”

A man might read those two poems a great many times without happening to realise that they are two poems on exactly the same subject — the subject of a trusting woman deserted by a man. And the whole difference — the difference struck by the very first note of the voice of any one who reads them — is this fundamental difference that Goldsmith’s words are spoken about a certain situation, and Burns’ words are spoken in that situation.

In the transition from one of these lyrics to the other, we have a vital change in the conception of the functions of the poet; a change of which Burns was in many ways the beginning, of which Browning, in a manner that we shall see presently, was the culmination.

Goldsmith writes fully and accurately in the tradition of the old historic idea of what a poet was. The poet, the *vates*, was the supreme and absolute critic of human existence, the chorus in the human drama; he

was, to employ two words, which when analysed are the same word, either a spectator or a seer. He took a situation, such as the situation of a woman deserted by a man before-mentioned, and he gave, as Goldsmith gives, his own personal and definite decision upon it, entirely based upon general principles, and entirely from the outside. Then, as in the case of *The Golden Treasury*, he has no sooner given judgment than there comes a bitter and confounding cry out of the very heart of the situation itself, which tells us things which would have been quite left out of account by the poet of the general rule. No one, for example, but a person who knew something of the inside of agony would have introduced that touch of the rage of the mourner against the chattering frivolity of nature, "Thou'll break my heart, thou bonny bird." We find and could find no such touch in Goldsmith. We have to arrive at the conclusion therefore, that the *vates* or poet in his absolute capacity is defied and overthrown by this new method of what may be called the songs of experience.

Now Browning, as he appears in *The Ring and the Book*, represents the attempt to discover, not the truth in the sense that Goldsmith states it, but the larger truth which is made up of all the emotional experiences, such as that rendered by Burns. Browning, like Goldsmith, seeks ultimately to be just and impartial, but he does it by endeavouring to feel acutely every kind of partiality. Goldsmith stands apart from all the passions of the case, and Browning includes them all. If Browning were endeavouring to do strict justice in a case like that of the deserted lady by the banks of Doon, he would not touch or

modify in the smallest particular the song as Burns sang it, but he would write other songs, perhaps equally pathetic. A lyric or a soliloquy would convince us suddenly by the mere pulse of its language, that there was some pathos in the other actors in the drama; some pathos, for example, in a weak man, conscious that in a passionate ignorance of life he had thrown away his power of love, lacking the moral courage to throw his prospects after it. We should be reminded again that there was some pathos in the position, let us say, of the seducer's mother, who had built all her hopes upon developments which a *mésalliance* would overthrow, or in the position of some rival lover, stricken to the ground with the tragedy in which he had not even the miserable comfort of a *locus standi*. All these characters in the story, Browning would realise from their own emotional point of view before he gave judgment. The poet in his ancient office held a kind of terrestrial day of judgment, and gave men halters and halos; Browning gives men neither halter nor halo, he gives them voices. This is indeed the most bountiful of all the functions of the poet, that he gives men words, for which men from the beginning of the world have starved more than for bread.

Here then we have the second great respect in which *The Ring and the Book* is the great epic of the age. It is the great epic of the age, because it is the expression of the belief, it might almost be said of the discovery, that no man ever lived upon this earth without possessing a point of view. No one ever lived who had not a little more to say for himself than any formal system of justice was likely to say for him. It is scarcely necessary to point out how entirely the

application of this principle would revolutionise the old heroic epic, in which the poet decided absolutely the moral relations and moral value of the characters. Suppose, for example, that Homer had written the *Odyssey* on the principle of *The Ring and the Book*, how disturbing, how weird an experience it would be to read the story from the point of view of Antinous! Without contradicting a single material fact, without telling a single deliberate lie, the narrative would so change the whole world around us, that we should scarcely know we were dealing with the same place and people. The calm face of Penelope would, it may be, begin to grow meaner before our eyes, like a face changing in a dream. She would begin to appear as a fickle and selfish woman, passing falsely as a widow, and playing a double game between the attentions of foolish but honourable young men, and the fitful appearances of a wandering and good-for-nothing sailor-husband; a man prepared to act that most well-worn of melodramatic rôles, the conjugal bully and blackmailer, the man who uses marital rights as an instrument for the worse kind of wrongs. Or, again, if we had the story of the fall of King Arthur told from the standpoint of Mordred, it would only be a matter of a word or two; in a turn, in the twinkling of an eye, we should find ourselves sympathising with the efforts of an earnest young man to frustrate the profligacies of high-placed paladins like Lancelot and Tristram, and ultimately discovering, with deep regret but unshaken moral courage, that there was no way to frustrate them, except by overthrowing the cold and priggish and incapable egotist who ruled the country, and the whole artificial and bombastic schemes which

bred these moral evils. It might be that in spite of this new view of the case, it would ultimately appear that Ulysses was really right and Arthur was really right, just as Browning makes it ultimately appear that Pompilia was really right. But any one can see the enormous difference in scope and difficulty between the old epic which told the whole story from one man's point of view, and the new epic which cannot come to its conclusion, until it has digested and assimilated views as paradoxical and disturbing as our imaginary defence of Antinous and apologia of Mordred.

One of the most important steps ever taken in the history of the world is this step, with all its various aspects, literary, political, and social, which is represented by *The Ring and the Book*. It is the step of deciding, in the face of many serious dangers and disadvantages, to let everybody talk. The poet of the old epic is the poet who had learnt to speak; Browning in the new epic is the poet who has learnt to listen. This listening to truth and error, to heretics, to fools, to intellectual bullies, to desperate partisans, to mere chatterers, to systematic poisoners of the mind, is the hardest lesson that humanity has ever been set to learn. *The Ring and the Book* is the embodiment of this terrible magnanimity and patience. It is the epic of free speech.

Free speech is an idea which has at present all the unpopularity of a truism; so that we tend to forget that it was not so very long ago that it had the more practical unpopularity which attaches to a new truth. Ingratitude is surely the chief of the intellectual sins of man. He takes his political benefits for granted,

just as he takes the skies and the seasons for granted. He considers the calm of a city street a thing as inevitable as the calm of a forest clearing, whereas it is only kept in peace by a sustained stretch and effort similar to that which keeps up a battle or a fencing match. Just as we forget where we stand in relation to natural phenomena, so we forget it in relation to social phenomena. We forget that the earth is a star, and we forget that free speech is a paradox.

It is not by any means self-evident upon the face of it that an insitution like the liberty of speech is right or just. It is not natural or obvious to let a man utter follies and abominations which you believe to be bad for mankind any more than it is natural or obvious to let a man dig up a part of the public road, or infect half a town with typhoid fever. The theory of free speech, that truth is so much larger and stranger and more many-sided than we know of, that it is very much better at all costs to hear every one's account of it, is a theory which has been justified upon the whole by experiment, but which remains a very daring and even a very surprising theory. It is really one of the great discoveries of the modern time, but once admitted it is a principle that does not merely affect politics, but philosophy, ethics, and finally poetry.

Browning was upon the whole the first poet to apply the principle to poetry. He perceived that if we wish to tell the truth about a human drama, we must not tell it merely like a melodrama, in which the villain is villainous and the comic man is comic. He saw that the truth had not been told until he had seen in the

villain the pure and disinterested gentleman that most villains firmly believe themselves to be, or until he had taken the comic man as seriously as it is the custom of comic men to take themselves. And in this Browning is beyond all question the founder of the most modern school of poetry. Everything that was profound, everything, indeed, that was tolerable in the æsthetes of 1880, and the decadent of 1890, has its ultimate source in Browning's great conception that every one's point of view is interesting, even if it be a jaundiced or a blood-shot point of view. He is at one with the decadents, in holding that it is emphatically profitable, that it is emphatically creditable to know something of the grounds of the happiness of a thoroughly bad man. Since his time we have indeed been somewhat over-satisfied with the moods of the burglar, and the pensive lyrics of the receiver of stolen goods. But Browning, united with the decadents on this point, of the value of every human testimony, is divided from them sharply and by a chasm in another equally important point. He held that it is necessary to listen to all sides of a question in order to discover the truth of it. But he held that there was a truth to discover. He held that justice was a mystery, but, not like the decadents, that justice was a delusion. He held, in other words, the true Browning doctrine, that in a dispute every one was to a certain extent right; not the decadent doctrine that in so mad a place as the world, every one must be by the nature of things wrong.

Browning's conception of the Universe can hardly be better expressed than in the old and pregnant fable about the five blind men who went to visit an elephant.

One of them seized its trunk, and asserted that an elephant was a kind of serpent; another embraced its leg, and was ready to die for the belief that an elephant was a kind of tree. In the same way to the man who leaned against its side it was a wall; to the man who had hold of its tail a rope, and to the man who ran upon its tusk a particularly unpleasant kind of spear. This, as I have said, is the whole theology and philosophy of Browning. But he differs from the psychological decadents and impressionists in this important point, that he thinks that although the blind men found out very little about the elephant, the elephant was an elephant, and was there all the time. The blind men formed mistaken theories because an elephant is a thing with a very curious shape. And Browning firmly believed that the Universe was a thing with a very curious shape indeed. No blind poet could even imagine an elephant without experience, and no man, however great and wise, could dream of God and not die. But there is a vital distinction between the mystical view of Browning, that the blind men are misled because there is so much for them to learn, and the purely impressionist and agnostic view of the modern poet, that the blind men were misled because there was nothing for them to learn. To the impressionist artist of our time we are not blind men groping after an elephant and naming it a tree or a serpent. We are maniacs, isolated in separate cells, and dreaming of trees and serpents without reason and without result.

CHAPTER VIII

THE PHILOSOPHY OF BROWNING

THE great fault of most of the appreciation of Browning lies in the fact that it conceives the moral and artistic value of his work to lie in what is called "the message of Browning," or "the teaching of Browning," or, in other words, in the mere opinions of Browning. Now Browning had opinions, just as he had a dress-suit or a vote for Parliament. He did not hesitate to express these opinions any more than he would have hesitated to fire off a gun, or open an umbrella, if he had possessed those articles, and realised their value. For example, he had, as his students and eulogists have constantly stated, certain definite opinions about the spiritual function of love, or the intellectual basis of Christianity. Those opinions were very striking and very solid, as everything was which came out of Browning's mind. His two great theories of the universe may be expressed in two comparatively parallel phrases. (The first was what may be called the hope which lies in the imperfection of man.) The characteristic poem of "Old Pictures in Florence" expresses very quaintly and beautifully the idea that some hope may always be based on deficiency itself; in other words, that in so far as man is a one-legged or a one-eyed creature.

there is something about his appearance which indicates that he should have another leg and another eye. The poem suggests admirably that such a sense of incompleteness may easily be a great advance upon a sense of completeness, that the part may easily and obviously be greater than the whole. And from this Browning draws, as he is fully justified in drawing, a definite hope for immortality and the larger scale of life. For nothing is more certain than that though this world is the only world that we have known, or of which we could even dream, the fact does remain that we have named it "a strange world." In other words, we have certainly felt that this world did not explain itself, that something in its complete and patent picture has been omitted. And Browning was right in saying that in a cosmos where incompleteness implies completeness, life implies immortality. This then was the first of the doctrines (or opinions) of Browning, the hope that lies in the imperfection of man. The second of the great Browning doctrines requires some audacity to express. It can only be properly stated as the hope that lies in the imperfection of God. That is to say, that Browning held that sorrow and self-denial, if they were the burdens of man, were also his privileges. He held that these stubborn sorrows and obscure valours might, to use a yet more strange expression, have provoked the envy of the Almighty. If man has self-sacrifice and God has none, then man has in the Universe a secret and blasphemous superiority. And this tremendous story of a Divine jealousy Browning reads into the story of the Crucifixion. If the Creator had not been crucified He would not have been as

great as thousands of wretched fanatics among His own creatures. It is needless to insist upon this point; any one who wishes to read it splendidly expressed need only be referred to "Saul." But these are emphatically the two main doctrines or opinions of Browning which I have ventured to characterise roughly as the hope in the imperfection of man, and more boldly as the hope in the imperfection of God. They are great thoughts, thoughts written by a great man, and they raise noble and beautiful doubts on behalf of faith which the human spirit will never answer or exhaust. But about them in connection with Browning there nevertheless remains something to be added.

Browning was, as most of his upholders and all his opponents say, an optimist. His theory, that man's sense of his own imperfection implies a design of perfection, is a very good argument for optimism. His theory that man's knowledge of and desire for self-sacrifice implies God's knowledge of and desire for self-sacrifice is another very good argument for optimism. But any one will make the deepest and blackest and most incurable mistake about Browning who imagines that his optimism was founded on any arguments for optimism. Because he had a strong intellect, because he had a strong power of conviction, he conceived and developed and asserted these doctrines of the [incompleteness of Man] and the [sacrifice of Omnipotence.] But these doctrines were the symptoms of his optimism, they were not its origin. [It is surely obvious that no one can be argued into optimism since no one can be argued into happiness.] Browning's optimism was not founded on

opinions which were the work of Browning, but on life which was the work of God. One of Browning's most celebrated biographers has said, that something of Browning's theology must be put down to his possession of a good digestion. The remark was, of course, like all remarks touching the tragic subject of digestion, intended to be funny and to convey some kind of doubt or diminution touching the value of Browning's faith. But if we examine the matter with somewhat greater care we shall see that it is indeed a thorough compliment to that faith. Nobody, strictly speaking, is happier on account of his digestion. He is happy because he is so constituted as to forget all about it. Nobody really is convulsed with delight at the thought of the ingenious machinery which he possesses inside him; the thing which delights him is simply the full possession of his own human body. I cannot in the least understand why a good digestion—that is a good body—should not be held to be as mystic a benefit as a sunset or the first flower of spring. But there is about digestion this peculiarity throwing a great light on human pessimism, that it is one of the many things which we never speak of as existing until they go wrong. We should think it ridiculous to speak of a man as suffering from his boots if we meant that he had really no boots. But we do speak of a man suffering from digestion when we mean that he suffers from a lack of digestion. In the same way we speak of a man suffering from nerves when we mean that his nerves are more inefficient than any one else's nerves. If any one wishes to see how grossly language can degenerate, he need only compare the old optimistic

use of the word nervous, which we employ in speaking of a nervous grip, with the new pessimistic use of the word, which we employ in speaking of a nervous manner. And as digestion is a good thing which sometimes goes wrong, as nerves are good things which sometimes go wrong, so existence itself in the eyes of Browning and all the great optimists is a good thing which sometimes goes wrong. He held himself as free to draw his inspiration from the gift of good health as from the gift of learning or the gift of fellowship. But he held that such gifts were in life innumerable and varied, and that every man, or at least almost every man, possessed some window looking out on this essential excellence of things.

Browning's optimism then, since we must continue to use this somewhat inadequate word, was a result of experience—experience which is for some mysterious reason generally understood in the sense of sad or disillusioning experience. An old gentleman rebuking a little boy for eating apples in a tree is in the common conception the type of experience. If he really wished to be a type of experience he would climb up the tree himself and proceed to experience the apples. Browning's faith was founded upon joyful experience, not in the sense that he selected his joyful experiences and ignored his painful ones, but in the sense that his joyful (experiences selected themselves) and (stood out in his memory by virtue of their own extraordinary intensity of colour.) He did not use experience in that mean and pompous sense in which it is used by the worldling advanced in years. He rather used it in that healthier and more joyful sense in which it is used at revivalist meetings. In the Salvation Army

a man's experiences mean his experiences of the mercy of God, and to Browning the meaning was much the same. But the revivalists' confessions deal mostly with experiences of prayer and praise; Browning's dealt pre-eminently with what may be called his own subject, the experiences of love.

And this quality of Browning's optimism, the quality of detail, is also a very typical quality. Browning's optimism is of that ultimate and unshakable order that is founded upon the absolute sight, and sound, and smell, and handling of things. If a man had gone up to Browning and asked him with all the solemnity of the eccentric, "Do you think life is worth living?" it is interesting to conjecture what his answer might have been. If he had been for the moment under the influence of the orthodox rationalistic deism of the theologian he would have said, "Existence is justified by its manifest design, its manifest adaptation of means to ends," or, in other words, "Existence is justified by its completeness." If, on the other hand, he had been influenced by his own serious intellectual theories he would have said, "Existence is justified by its air of growth and doubtfulness," or, in other words, "Existence is justified by its incompleteness." But if he had not been influenced in his answer either by the accepted opinions, or by his own opinions, but had simply answered the question "Is life worth living?" with the real, vital answer that awaited it in his own soul, he would have said as likely as not, "Crimson toadstools in Hampshire." Some plain, glowing picture of this sort left on his mind would be his real verdict on what the universe had meant to him. To his traditions hope was traced to

order, to his speculations hope was traced to disorder. But to Browning himself hope was traced to something like red toadstools. His mysticism was not of that idle and wordy type which believes that a flower is symbolical of life; it was rather of that deep and eternal type which believes that life, a mere abstraction, is symbolical of a flower. With him the great concrete experiences which God made always come first; his own deductions and speculations about them always second. And in this point we find the real peculiar inspiration of his very original poems.

One of the very few critics who seem to have got near to the actual secret of Browning's optimism is Mr. Santayana in his most interesting book *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*. He, in contradistinction to the vast mass of Browning's admirers, had discovered what was the real root virtue of Browning's poetry; and the curious thing is, that having discovered that root virtue, he thinks it is a vice. He describes the poetry of Browning most truly as the poetry of barbarism, by which he means the poetry which utters the primeval and indivisible emotions.

"For the barbarian is the man who regards his passions as their own excuse for being, who does not domesticate them either by understanding their cause, or by conceiving their ideal goal." Whether this be or be not a good definition of the barbarian, it is an excellent and perfect definition of the poet. It might, perhaps, be suggested that barbarians, as a matter of fact, are generally highly traditional and respectable persons who would not put a feather wrong in their head-gear, and who generally have very few feelings and think very little about those they have. It is when we have

grown to a greater and more civilised stature that we begin to realise and put to ourselves intellectually the great feelings that sleep in the depths of us. Thus it is that the literature of our day has steadily advanced towards a passionate simplicity, and we become more primeval as the world grows older until Whitman writes huge and chaotic psalms to express the sensations of a schoolboy out fishing, and Maeterlinck embodies in symbolic dramas the feelings of a child in the dark.

Thus, Mr. Santayana is, perhaps, the most valuable of all the Browning critics. He has gone out of his way to endeavour to realise what it is that repels him in Browning, and he has discovered the fault which none of Browning's opponents have discovered. And in this he has discovered the merit which none of Browning's admirers have discovered. Whether the quality be a good or a bad quality, Mr. Santayana is perfectly right. The whole of Browning's poetry does rest upon primitive feeling; and the only comment to be added is that so does the whole of every one else's poetry. Poetry deals entirely with those great eternal and mainly forgotten wishes which are the ultimate despots of existence. Poetry presents things as they are to our emotions, not as they are to any theory, however plausible, or any argument, however conclusive. If love is in truth a glorious vision, poetry will say that it is a glorious vision, and no philosophers will persuade poetry to say that it is the exaggeration of the instinct of sex. If bereavement is a bitter and continually aching thing, poetry will say that it is so, and no philosophers will persuade poetry to say that it is an

evolutionary stage of great biological value. And here comes in the whole value and object of poetry, that it is perpetually challenging all systems with the test of a terrible sincerity. The practical value of poetry is that it is realistic upon a point upon which nothing else can be realistic, the point of the actual desires of man. Ethics is the science of actions, but poetry is the science of motives. Some actions are ugly, and therefore some parts of ethics are ugly. But all motives are beautiful, or present themselves for the moment as beautiful, and therefore all poetry is beautiful. If poetry deals with the basest matter, with the shedding of blood for gold, it ought to suggest the gold as well as the blood. Only poetry can realise motives, because motives are all pictures of happiness. And the supreme and most practical value of poetry is this, that in poetry, as in music, a note is struck which expresses beyond the power of rational statement a condition of mind, and all actions arise from a condition of mind. Prose can only use a large and clumsy notation; it can only say that a man is miserable, or that a man is happy; it is forced to ignore that there are a million diverse kinds of misery and a million diverse kinds of happiness. Poetry alone, with the first throb of its metre, can tell us whether the depression is the kind of depression that drives a man to suicide, or the kind of depression that drives him to the Tivoli. Poetry can tell us whether the happiness is the happiness that sends a man to a restaurant, or the much richer and fuller happiness that sends him to church.

Now the supreme value of Browning as an optimist lies in this that we have been examining, that beyond

all his conclusions, and deeper than all his arguments, he was passionately interested in and in love with existence. If the heavens had fallen, and all the waters of the earth run with blood, he would still have been interested in existence, if possible a little more so. He is a great poet of human joy for precisely the reason of which Mr. Santayana complains: that his happiness is primal, and beyond the reach of philosophy. He is something far more convincing, far more comforting, far more religiously significant than an optimist: he is a happy man.

This happiness he finds, as all men must find happiness, in his own way. He does not find the great part of his joy in those matters in which most poets find felicity. He finds much of it in those matters in which most poets find ugliness and vulgarity. He is to a considerable extent the poet of towns. "Do you care for nature much?" a friend of his asked him. "Yes, a great deal," he said, "but for human beings a great deal more." Nature, with its splendid and soothing sanity, has the power of convincing most poets of the essential worthiness of things. There are few poets who, if they escaped from the rowdiest waggonette of trippers, could not be quieted again and exalted by dropping into a small wayside field. The speciality of Browning is rather that he would have been quieted and exalted by the waggonette.

To Browning, probably the beginning and end of all optimism, was to be found in the faces in the street. To him they were all masks of a deity, the heads of a hundred-headed Indian god of nature. Each one of them looked towards some quarter of the heavens, not looked upon by any other eyes. Each one of them

wore some expression, some blend of eternal joy and eternal sorrow, not to be found in any other countenance. The sense of the absolute sanctity of human difference was the deepest of all his senses. He was hungrily interested in all human things, but it would have been quite impossible to have said of him that he loved humanity. He did not love humanity but men. His sense of the difference between one man and another would have made the thought of melting them into a lump called humanity simply loathsome and prosaic. It would have been to him like playing four hundred beautiful airs at once. The mixture would not combine all, it would lose all. Browning believed that to every man that ever lived upon this earth had been given a definite and peculiar confidence of God. Each one of us was engaged on secret service; each one of us had a peculiar message; each one of us was the founder of a religion. Of that religion our thoughts, our faces, our bodies, our hats, our boots, our tastes, our virtues, and even our vices, were more or less fragmentary and inadequate expressions.

In the delightful memoirs of that very remarkable man Sir Charles Gavan Duffy, there is an extremely significant and interesting anecdote about Browning, the point of which appears to have attracted very little attention. Duffy was dining with Browning and John Forster, and happened to make some chance allusion to his own adherence to the Roman Catholic faith, and Forster remarked, half jestingly, that he did not suppose that Browning would like him any the better for that. Browning would seem to have opened his eyes with some astonishment. He immediately asked why

Forster should suppose him hostile to the Roman Church. Forster and Duffy replied almost simultaneously, by referring to "Bishop Blougram's Apology," which had just appeared, and asking whether the portrait of the sophisticated and self-indulgent priest had not been intended for a satire on Cardinal Wiseman. "Certainly," replied Browning cheerfully, "I intended it for Cardinal Wiseman, but I don't consider it a satire, there is nothing hostile about it." This is the real truth which lies at the heart of what may be called the great sophisticated monologues which Browning wrote in later years. They are not satires or attacks upon their subjects, they are not even harsh and unfeeling exposures of them. They are defences; they say or are intended to say the best that can be said for the persons with whom they deal. But very few people in this world would care to listen to the real defence of their own characters. The real defence, the defence which belongs to the Day of Judgment, would make such damaging admissions, would clear away so many artificial virtues, would tell such tragedies of weakness and failure, that a man would sooner be misunderstood and censured by the world than exposed to that awful and merciless eulogy. One of the most practically difficult matters which arise from the code of manners and the conventions of life, is that we cannot properly justify a human being, because that justification would involve the admission of things which may not conventionally be admitted. We might explain and make human and respectable, for example, the conduct of some old fighting politician, who, for the good of his party and his country, acceded to measures of which he disapproved; but we cannot, because we are not

allowed to admit that he ever acceded to measures of which he disapproved. We might touch the life of many dissolute public men with pathos, and a kind of defeated courage by telling the truth about the history of their sins. But we should throw the world into an uproar if we hinted that they had any. Thus the decencies of civilisation do not merely make it impossible to revile a man, they make it impossible to praise him.

Browning, in such poems as "Bishop Blougram's Apology," breaks this first mask of goodness in order to break the second mask of evil, and gets to the real goodness at last; he dethrones a saint in order to humanise a scoundrel.* This is one typical side of the real optimism of Browning. And there is indeed little danger that such optimism will become weak and sentimental and popular, the refuge of every idler, the excuse of every ne'er-do-weel. There is little danger that men will desire to excuse their souls before God by presenting themselves before men as such snobs as Bishop Blougram, or such dastards as Sludge the Medium. There is no pessimism, however stern, that is so stern as this optimism; it is as merciless as the mercy of God.

It is true that in this, as in almost everything else connected with Browning's character, the matter cannot be altogether exhausted by such a generalisation as the above. Browning's was a simple character, and therefore very difficult to understand, since it was impulsive, unconscious, and kept no reckoning of its moods. Probably in a great many cases, the original impulse which led Browning to plan a soliloquy was a kind of anger mixed with curiosity; possibly the first

charcoal sketch of Blougram was a caricature of a priest. Browning, as we have said, had prejudices, and had a capacity for anger, and two of his angriest prejudices were against a certain kind of worldly clericalism, and against almost every kind of spiritualism. But as he worked upon the portraits at least, a new spirit began to possess him, and he enjoyed every spirited and just defence the men could make of themselves, like triumphant blows in a battle, and towards the end would come the full revelation, and Browning would stand up in the man's skin and testify to the man's ideals. However this may be, it is worth while to notice one very curious error that has arisen in connection with one of the most famous of these monologues.

When Robert Browning was engaged in that somewhat obscure quarrel with the spiritualist Home, it is generally and correctly stated that he gained a great number of the impressions which he afterwards embodied in "Mr. Sludge the Medium." The statement so often made, particularly in the spiritualist accounts of the matter, that Browning himself is the original of the interlocutor and exposé of Sludge, is of course merely an example of that reckless reading from which no one has suffered more than Browning, despite his students and societies. The man to whom Sludge addresses his confession is a Mr. Hiram H. Horsfall, an American, a patron of spiritualists, and, as it is more than once suggested, something of a fool. Nor is there the smallest reason to suppose that Sludge considered as an individual bears any particular resemblance to Home considered as an individual. But without doubt "Mr. Sludge the Medium" is a general

statement of the view of spiritualism at which Browning had arrived from his acquaintance with Home and Home's circle. And about that view of spiritualism there is something rather peculiar to notice. The poem, appearing as it did at the time when the intellectual public had just become conscious of the existence of spiritualism, attracted a great deal of attention, and aroused a great deal of controversy. The spiritualists called down thunder upon the head of the poet, whom they depicted as a vulgar and ribald lampooner who had not only committed the profanity of sneering at the mysteries of a higher state of life, but the more unpardonable profanity of sneering at the convictions of his own wife. The sceptics, on the other hand, hailed the poem with delight as a blasting exposure of spiritualism, and congratulated the poet on making himself the champion of the sane and scientific view of magic. Which of these two parties was right about the question of attacking the reality of spiritualism it is neither easy nor necessary to discuss. For the simple truth, which neither of the two parties and none of the students of Browning seem to have noticed, is that "Mr. Sludge the Medium" is not an attack upon spiritualism. It would be a great deal nearer the truth, though not entirely the truth, to call it a justification of spiritualism. The whole essence of Browning's method is involved in this matter, and the whole essence of Browning's method is so vitally misunderstood that to say that "Mr. Sludge the Medium" is something like a defence of spiritualism will bear on the face of it the appearance of the most empty and perverse of paradoxes. But so, when we have

comprehended Browning's spirit, the fact will be found to be.

The general idea is that Browning must have intended "Sludge" for an attack on spiritual phenomena, because the medium in that poem is made a vulgar and contemptible mountebank, because his cheats are quite openly confessed, and he himself put into every ignominious situation, detected, exposed, throttled, horsewhipped, and forgiven. To regard this deduction as sound is to misunderstand Browning at the very start of every poem that he ever wrote. There is nothing that the man loved more, nothing that deserves more emphatically to be called a speciality of Browning, than the utterance of large and noble truths by the lips of mean and grotesque human beings. In his poetry praise and wisdom were perfected not only out of the mouths of babes and sucklings, but out of the mouths of swindlers and snobs. Now what, as a matter of fact, is the outline and development of the poem of "Sludge"? The climax of the poem, considered as a work of art, is so fine that it is quite extraordinary that any one should have missed the point of it, since it is the whole point of the monologue. Sludge the Medium has been caught out in a piece of unquestionable trickery, a piece of trickery for which there is no conceivable explanation or palliation which will leave his moral character intact. He is therefore seized with a sudden resolution, partly angry, partly frightened, and partly humorous, to become absolutely frank, and to tell the whole truth about himself for the first time not only to his dupe, but to himself. He excuses himself for the earlier stages of the trickster's life by a survey

of the border-land between truth and fiction, not by any means a piece of sophistry or cynicism, but a perfectly fair statement of an ethical difficulty which does exist. There are some people who think that it must be immoral to admit that there are any doubtful cases of morality, as if a man should refrain from discussing the precise boundary at the upper end of the Isthmus of Panama, for fear the inquiry should shake his belief in the existence of North America. People of this kind quite consistently think Sludge to be merely a scoundrel talking nonsense. It may be remembered that they thought the same thing of Newman. It is actually supposed, apparently in the current use of words, that casuistry is the name of a crime; it does not appear to occur to people that casuistry is a science, and about as much a crime as botany. This tendency to casuistry in Browning's monologues has done much towards establishing for him that reputation for pure intellectualism which has done him so much harm. But casuistry in this sense is not a cold and analytical thing, but a very warm and sympathetic thing. To know what combinations of excuse might justify a man in manslaughter or bigamy, is not to have a callous indifference to virtue; it is rather to have so ardent an admiration for virtue as to seek it in the remotest desert and the darkest incognito.

This is emphatically the case with the question of truth and falsehood raised in "Sludge the Medium." To say that it is sometimes difficult to tell at what point the romancer turns into the liar is not to state a cynicism, but a perfectly honest piece of human observation. To think that such a view involves the

negation of honesty is like thinking that red is green, because the two fade into each other in the colours of the rainbow. It is really difficult to decide when we come to the extreme edge of veracity, when and when not it is permissible to create an illusion. A standing example, for instance, is the case of the fairy-tales. We think a father entirely pure and benevolent when he tells his children that a beanstalk grew up into heaven, and a pumpkin turned into a coach. We should consider that he lapsed from purity and benevolence if he told his children that in walking home that evening he had seen a beanstalk grow half-way up the church, or a pumpkin grow as large as a wheelbarrow. Again, few people would object to that general privilege whereby it is permitted to a person in narrating even a true anecdote to work up the climax by any exaggerative touches which really tend to bring it out. The reason of this is that the telling of the anecdote has become, like the telling of the fairy-tale, almost a distinct artistic creation; to offer to tell a story is in ordinary society like offering to recite or play the violin. No one denies that a fixed and genuine moral rule could be drawn up for these cases, but no one surely need be ashamed to admit that such a rule is not entirely easy to draw up. And when a man like Sludge traces much of his moral downfall to the indistinctness of the boundary and the possibility of beginning with a natural extravagance and ending with a gross abuse, it certainly is not possible to deny his right to be heard.

We must recur, however, to the question of the main development of the Sludge self-analysis. He begins, as we have said, by urging a general excuse by the

fact that in the heat of social life, in the course of telling tales in the intoxicating presence of sympathisers and believers, he has slid into falsehood almost before he is aware of it. So far as this goes, there is truth in his plea. Sludge might indeed find himself unexpectedly justified if we had only an exact record of how true were the tales told about Conservatives in an exclusive circle of Radicals, or the stories told about Radicals in a circle of indignant Conservatives. But after this general excuse, Sludge goes on to a perfectly cheerful and unfeeling admission of fraud: this principal feeling towards his victims is by his own confession a certain unfathomable contempt for people who are so easily taken in. He professes to know how to lay the foundations for every species of personal acquaintanceship, and how to remedy the slight and trivial slips of making Plato write Greek in naughts and crosses,

“As I fear, sir, he sometimes used to do
Before I found the useful book that knows.”

It would be difficult to imagine any figure more indecently confessional, more entirely devoid of not only any of the restraints of conscience, but of any of the restraints even of a wholesome personal conceit, than Sludge the Medium. He confesses not only fraud, but things which are to the natural man more difficult to confess even than fraud—effeminacy, futility, physical cowardice. And then, when the last of his loathsome secrets has been told, when he has nothing left either to gain or to conceal, then he rises up into a perfect bankrupt sublimity and makes the great avowal which is the whole pivot and meaning of

the poem. He says in effect: "Now that my interest in deceit is utterly gone, now that I have admitted, to my own final infamy, the frauds that I have practised, now that I stand before you in a patent and open villainy which has something of the disinterestedness and independence of the innocent, now I tell you with the full and impartial authority of a lost soul that I believe that there is something in spiritualism. In the course of a thousand conspiracies, by the labour of a thousand lies, I have discovered that there is really something in this matter that neither I nor any other man understands. I am a thief, an adventurer, a deceiver of mankind, but I am not a disbeliever in spiritualism. I have seen too much for that." This is the confession of faith of Mr. Sludge the Medium. It would be difficult to imagine a confession of faith framed and presented in a more impressive manner. Sludge is a witness to his faith as the old martyrs were witnesses to their faith, but even more impressively. They testified to their religion even after they had lost their liberty, and their eyesight, and their right hands. Sludge testifies to his religion even after he has lost his dignity and his honour.

It may be repeated that it is truly extraordinary that any one should have failed to notice that this avowal on behalf of spiritualism is the pivot of the poem. The avowal itself is not only expressed clearly, but prepared and delivered with admirable rhetorical force:—

"Now for it, then! Will you believe me, though?
 You've heard what I confess: I don't unsay
 A single word: I cheated when I could,
 Rapped with my toe-joints, set sham hands to work,

Wrote down names weak in sympathetic ink,
Rubbed odic lights with ends of phosper-match,
And all the rest ; believe that : believe this,
By the same token, though it seem to set
The crooked straight again, unsay the said,
Stick up what I've knocked down ; I can't help that,
It's truth ! I somehow vomit truth to-day.
This trade of mine — I don't know, can't be sure
But there was something in it, tricks and all !”

It is strange to call a poem with so clear and fine a climax an attack on spiritualism. To miss that climax is like missing the last sentence in a good anecdote, or putting the last act of *Othello* into the middle of the play. Either the whole poem of “Sludge the Medium” means nothing at all, and is only a lampoon upon a cad, of which the matter is almost as contemptible as the subject, or it means this—that some real experiences of the unseen lie even at the heart of hypocrisy, and that even the spiritualist is at root spiritual.

One curious theory which is common to most Browning critics is that Sludge must be intended for a pure and conscious impostor, because after his confession, and on the personal withdrawal of Mr. Horsfall, he bursts out into horrible curses against that gentleman and cynical boasts of his future triumphs in a similar line of business. Surely this is to have a very feeble notion either of nature or art. A man driven absolutely into a corner might humiliate himself, and gain a certain sensation almost of luxury in that humiliation, in pouring out all his imprisoned thoughts and obscure victories. For let it never be forgotten that a hypocrite is a very unhappy man ; he is a man who has devoted himself to a most

delicate and arduous intellectual art in which he may achieve masterpieces which he must keep secret, fight thrilling battles, and win hair's-breadth victories for which he cannot have a whisper of praise. A really accomplished impostor is the most wretched of geniuses; he is a Napoleon on a desert island. A man might surely, therefore, when he was certain that his credit was gone, take a certain pleasure in revealing the tricks of his unique trade, and gaining not indeed credit, but at least a kind of glory. And in the course of this self-revelation he would come at last upon that part of himself which exists in every man—that part which does believe in, and value, and worship something. This he would fling in his hearer's face with even greater pride, and take a delight in giving a kind of testimony to his religion which no man had ever given before—the testimony of a martyr who could not hope to be a saint. But surely all this sudden tempest of candour in the man would not mean that he would burst into tears and become an exemplary ratepayer, like a villain in the worst parts of Dickens. The moment the danger was withdrawn, the sense of having given himself away, of having betrayed the secret of his infamous freemasonry, would add an indescribable violence and foulness to his reaction of rage. A man in such a case would do exactly as Sludge does. He would declare his own shame, declare the truth of his creed, and then, when he realised what he had done, say something like this:—

“R-r-r, you brute-beast and blackguard! Cowardly scamp!
I only wish I dared burn down the house
And spoil your sniggering!”

and so on, and so on.

He would react like this; it is one of the most artistic strokes in Browning. But it does not prove that he was a hypocrite about spiritualism, or that he was speaking more truthfully in the second outburst than in the first. Whence came this extraordinary theory that a man is always speaking most truly when he is speaking most coarsely? The truth about oneself is a very difficult thing to express, and coarse speaking will seldom do it.

When we have grasped this point about "Sludge the Medium," we have grasped the key to the whole series of Browning's casuistical monologues — *Bishop Blougram's Apology*, *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau*, *Fra Lippo Lippi*, *Fifine at the Fair*, *Aristophanes' Apology*, and several of the monologues in *The Ring and the Book*. They are all, without exception, dominated by this one conception of a certain reality tangled almost inextricably with unrealities in a man's mind. And the peculiar fascination which resides in the thought that the greatest lies about a man, and the greatest truths about him, may be found side by side in the same eloquent and sustained utterance.

"For Blougram, he believed, say, half he spoke."

Or, to put the matter in another way, the general idea of these poems is, that a man cannot help telling some truth even when he sets out to tell lies. If a man comes to tell us that he has discovered perpetual motion, or been swallowed by the sea-serpent, there will yet be some point in the story where he will tell us about himself almost all that we require to know.

If any one wishes to test the truth, or to see the best examples of this general idea in Browning's

monologues, he may be recommended to notice one peculiarity of these poems which is rather striking. As a whole, these apologies are written in a particularly burly and even brutal English. Browning's love of what is called the ugly is nowhere else so fully and extravagantly indulged. This, like a great many other things for which Browning as an artist is blamed, is perfectly appropriate to the theme. A vain, ill-mannered, and untrustworthy egotist, defending his own sordid doings with his own cheap and weather-beaten philosophy, is very likely to express himself best in a language flexible and pungent, but indelicate and without dignity. But the peculiarity of these loose and almost slangy soliloquies is that every now and then in them there occur bursts of pure poetry which are like a burst of birds singing. Browning does not hesitate to put some of the most perfect lines that he or any one else have ever written in the English language into the mouths of such slaves as Sludge and Guido Franceschini. Take, for the sake of example, "Bishop Blougram's Apology." The poem is one of the most grotesque in the poet's works. It is intentionally redolent of the solemn materialism and patrician grossness of a grand dinner-party *à deux*. It has many touches of an almost wild bathos, such as the young man who bears the impossible name of Gigadibs. The Bishop, in pursuing his worldly argument for conformity, points out with truth that a condition of doubt is a condition that cuts both ways, and that if we cannot be sure of the religious theory of life, neither can we be sure of the material theory of life, and that in turn is capable of becoming an uncertainty continually shaken by a tormenting sugges-

tion. We cannot establish ourselves on rationalism, and make it bear fruit to us. Faith itself is capable of becoming the darkest and most revolutionary of doubts. Then comes the passage:—

“Just when we are safest, there’s a sunset-touch,
A fancy from a flower-bell, some one’s death,
A chorus ending from Euripides, —
And that’s enough for fifty hopes and fears
As old and new at once as Nature’s self,
To rap and knock and enter in our soul,
Take hands and dance there, a fantastic ring,
Round the ancient idol, on his base again, —
The grand Perhaps !”

Nobler diction and a nobler meaning could not have been put into the mouth of Pompilia, or Rabbi Ben Ezra. It is in reality put into the mouth of a vulgar, fashionable priest, justifying his own cowardice over the comfortable wine and the cigars.

Along with this tendency to poetry among Browning’s knaves, must be reckoned another characteristic, their uniform tendency to theism. These loose and mean characters speak of many things feverishly and vaguely; of one thing they always speak with confidence and composure, their relation to God. It may seem strange at first sight that those who have outlived the indulgence, not only of every law, but of every reasonable anarchy, should still rely so simply upon the indulgence of divine perfection. Thus Sludge is certain that his life of lies and conjuring tricks has been conducted in a deep and subtle obedience to the message really conveyed by the conditions created by God. Thus Bishop Blougram is certain that his life of panic-stricken and tottering compromise has been really justified as the only

method that could unite him with God. Thus Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau is certain that every dodge in his thin string of political dodges has been the true means of realising what he believes to be the will of God. Every one of these meagre swindlers, while admitting a failure in all things relative, claims an awful alliance with the Absolute. To many it will at first sight appear a dangerous doctrine indeed. But, in truth, it is a most solid and noble and salutary doctrine, far less dangerous than its opposite. Every one on this earth should believe, amid whatever madness or moral failure, that his life and temperament have some object on the earth. Every one on the earth should believe that he has something to give to the world which cannot otherwise be given. Every one should, for the good of men and the saving of his own soul, believe that it is possible, even if we are the enemies of the human race, to be the friends of God. The evil wrought by this mystical pride, great as it often is, is like a straw to the evil wrought by a materialistic self-abandonment. The crimes of the devil who thinks himself of immeasurable value are as nothing to the crimes of the devil who thinks himself of no value. With Browning's knaves we have always this eternal interest, that they are real somewhere, and may at any moment begin to speak poetry. We are talking to a peevish and garrulous sneak; we are watching the play of his paltry features, his evasive eyes, and babbling lips. And suddenly the face begins to change and harden, the eyes glare like the eyes of a mask, the whole face of clay becomes a common mouthpiece, and the voice that comes forth is the voice of God, uttering His everlasting soliloquy.

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ENGLISH MEN OF LETTERS

TENNYSON

BY

SIR ALFRED LYALL, K.C.B.

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TENNISON

CHAPTER I

BOYHOOD AT CAMBRIDGE

THAT the imaginative literature of a period preserves and represents the ideas, feelings, and manners of the generation to which it belongs, is sufficiently manifest. And Taine, in his exposition of the theory upon which he wrote his *History of English Literature*, affirms that any considerable literary work will exhibit, under careful analysis, not only the writer's state of mind, his experiences and way of life, but also the long-descended influences of race and tradition, the temper of his time, and the general intellectual condition of his nation. The choice of words (he says), the style, the metaphors used, the accent and rhythm of verses, the logical order of his reasoning, are all outward forms and signs of these complex impressions, and so of the environment that has moulded them. Literature, in short, may be employed by the critic and the historian as a delicate instrument for analysis, for investigating the psychology of the man and of his period, for laying bare the springs of thought and action which underlie and explain history. And poetry is the most intense expression of the dominant emotions and the higher ideals of the age.

Whether Taine did not press his theory too far

is a question that has been often debated; and at any rate the proper use of it demands a master-hand. Certain it is that each age has its peculiar spirit, its own outlook on the world; and that a great poet, or group of poets, absorb the new ideas growing up around them, and have the gift of inventing their appropriate fashion or setting. They are usually followed by a host of imitators; but when the work has been once well done, the highest imitative skill will not make it really worth doing again in the same manner; we must wait until the changing world closes one period and opens a fresh one. This point of view may perhaps be accepted in studying the life and works of one who has been the chief poet of our own time. It is true that the increasing variety and diffusion of literature during the nineteenth century interfere with the method of taking one writer, however eminent, as the intellectual representative of his society, and also that we do not yet stand at a sufficient distance from a contemporary poet to be able to measure accurately his position. Nevertheless, Tennyson's popularity grew so steadily and spread so widely for nearly sixty years, and his influence over his generation has been so remarkable, that his finest poetry may undoubtedly be treated as an illustrative record of the prevailing spirit, of the temperament, and to some degree of the national character of his period.

It is in Tennyson's poetry, moreover, that we must look for the chronicle of his life. That no biographer could so truly give him as he gives himself in his own works, are almost the first words of the preface to the admirable *Memoir* written of his father by the present Lord Tennyson. So thoroughly, indeed, and so

recently, has this biography been written, with such complete and exclusive command of all available materials, that in regard to the course and incidents of the poet's life it leaves almost nothing to be discovered or added; and every subsequent narrative must draw upon this source of information. Nearly all the private or personal facts and incidents connected with Tennyson or with his family have, therefore, been necessarily taken directly from the *Memoir*.¹

Alfred Tennyson descended from a family that had been settled for some centuries in the north-east of England, at first in Holderness, beyond the Humber, and latterly in Lincolnshire. His father, Dr. George Clayton Tennyson, was Rector of Somersby near Horncastle, and of other small parishes. Mr. Howitt, writing in 1847, says of the Rector that he was a man of very various talents, something of a poet, a painter, an architect, and a musician. The poet's mother was Elizabeth, daughter of the Reverend Stephen Fytche. At Somersby he was born on the 6th August 1809; and when he was seven years old he was sent to school at the neighbouring town of Louth. In those days, and long afterward, boys made their first, often their hardest, experience of a rough world at a very tender age, for in these country schools the discipline was harsh and the manners rude; so that a child lived between fear of the master's rod and the bullying of his big schoolmates, and probably learnt little more than the habit of endurance. Professor Hales has left a record² of his experiences at this school, which

¹ The writer of this volume has made some occasional use of an article that he contributed on Tennyson to the *Edinburgh Review*.

² Appendix to vol. i. of the *Memoir*.

shows that the masters had a way of hitting the boys wantonly, an unconscious propensity to find amusement in giving pain that often becomes habitual. But Tennyson's school experiences, though early, were fortunately short, for after two years he was removed from Louth, and it appears that for the next ten years he was taught at home by his father, whose scholarship was considerable. No better luck can befall a boy who can avail himself of it than to be left to himself among good books while his mind is quite fresh; and Tennyson made full use of the Rector's ample library. His earliest verses, at fourteen or fifteen years of age, show uncommon promise; and in 1826, when he was seventeen, were published the *Poems by Two Brothers* (Alfred and Charles) upon a variety of subjects, grave and gay, evidently drawn from wide miscellaneous reading: the metrical composition is promising, while there are occasional signs of that descriptive faculty which matured so rapidly in Tennyson's later works. In 1828 he went, with his brother Charles, to Cambridge, and matriculated at Trinity College, where at first Alfred, being accustomed to home life, and not having passed through the preparatory ordeal of a public school, found himself solitary and ill at ease.

“I know not how it is, but I feel isolated here in the midst of society. The country is so disgustingly level, the revelry of the place so monotonous, the studies of the University so uninteresting, so much matter of fact. None but dry-headed, angular, calculating little gentlemen can take much delight in them.”¹

But his face and figure were both very remarkable, and his rare intellectual qualities could not long remain

¹ *Memoir*, vol. i. p. 34.

undiscovered. The list given in the *Memoir* of the friends with whom he consorted shows that he soon became intimate with the best men at Cambridge, whose admiration and attachment he rapidly won. It is evident that he had already a notable gift of terse and forcible expression, and the turn for apt metaphors which comes from a lively imagination. He lived among men who made the right use of a University, who delighted in the interchange of ideas and opinions, in the pursuit of knowledge, in the discussion of politics, in literature, speculation, and scientific discoveries; who were keenly interested in the world around them, and in the condition of their own country. In short, he was one of the few great English poets who have fallen in readily with the ways and manners of a cultured class and their social surroundings, who did not in their youth either hold themselves apart from the ordinary life of school or college, or live recklessly, or rebel against social conventions.

As the poets of the foregoing generation had been profoundly stirred in their first manhood by the revolutionary tumult in France, so Tennyson felt and sympathised, though more moderately, with the English agitation for reform. But in 1830 the period of wild enthusiasm for freedom, for the rights of man and for abstract political theories, had passed away; the vague hatred of priests and despots had become toned down into demands for reasonable improvements of Church and State. It was an age of practical Liberalism, of strong intellectual fermentation stimulated by the growing power of the Press; of energetic agitation for political, economical, and legislative reforms on one side, resisted on the other side by stubborn de-

fenders of antiquated institutions that were believed to be essential safeguards against the total overthrow of society. In those days the ardent young Liberal had a definite programme and a clear objective for his attack; though his impulse might be restrained by alarm at the violent methods and sweeping theories that were in vogue with extreme and resolute reformers. Tennyson was never of a sanguine temperament; and his reflective mind was always liable to be darkened by the apprehension of consequences. He represented, naturally, the temperate opinions on questions of Church and State of an educated Liberal, with whom rioting and violent Radicalism strengthened the fellow-feeling for widespread distress, and for the real needs and grievances of the people. The notes of bitter irony, the spirit of fierce revolt that run through the poetry of Byron and Shelley, belong to another time and temper. In Tennyson we have the Englishman's ingrained abhorrence of unruly disorder, the tradition of a State well balanced, of liberty fenced in by laws, of veneration for the past; we have the hatred of fanaticism in any shape, political or clerical, the distrust of popular impatience, the belief in the gradual betterment of human ills. In the verses to Mary Boyle, written long afterwards, he alludes to an incident that cannot but have accentuated his innate dread of mob-rule, which comes out in several passages of his later poems —

“ In rick-fire days,
When Dives loathed the times, and paced his land
 In fear of worse,
And sanguine Lazarus felt a vacant hand
 Fill with *his* purse ;

For lowly minds were madden'd to the height
 By tonguester tricks,
And once — I well remember that red night
 When thirty ricks,
All flaming, made an English homestead Hell —
 These hands of mine
Have helpt to pass a bucket from the well
 Along the line."

When he was asked what politics he held, he answered characteristically, "I am of the same politics as Shakespeare, Bacon, and every sane man"; and he might not have objected to be classed, theologically, among those who restrict their confession of faith to the declaration that they hold the religion of all sensible men.

That Tennyson was numbered among the Apostles at Cambridge may be reckoned as a sign of his early reputation; the more so because he appears to have contributed very little, either by speech or writing, to the free discussions on things temporal and spiritual of that notable society. He is depicted as smoking and meditating, sitting in front of the fire, summing up argument in one short phrase; and the only essay that he produced he was too modest to deliver. Of the Apostles various reminiscences survive; the subjoined extract may be quoted to explain its constitution and character: —

"The very existence of this body was scarcely known to the University at large, and its members held reticence to be a point of honour. . . . The members were on the look-out for any indications of intellectual originality, academical or otherwise, and specially contemptuous of humbug, cant, and the qualities of the windbag in general. To be elected, therefore, was virtually to receive a certificate from some of your cleverest contemporaries that they regarded you likely

to be in future an eminent man. The judgment so passed was perhaps as significant as that implied by University honours, and a very large proportion of the Apostles have justified the anticipation of their fellows.”¹

In Tennyson’s case the apostolic prophecy has been undoubtedly fulfilled; and his prize poem on Timbuctoo, written in his twentieth year, soon appeared to confirm among his friends their first augury of his future celebrity. It was patched up, he tells us, from an old poem on the Battle of Armageddon, a curious adaptation of subjects that might be supposed to have nothing in common; except, possibly, such hazy distances of space and time as might afford wide scope to a poet’s imagination.

Academic distinction in verse may have often suggested predictions of coming fame, yet these are rarely fulfilled, for the stars of poetical genius run in irregular courses. Tennyson’s poem had the usual qualities of correct taste and polished diction, but it also showed much originality of treatment and creative fancy; for the writer, instead of attempting the unpromising task of describing a den of savages, or of rendering poetically the accounts brought home by travellers, places himself on a mountain that overlooks the great ocean, muses over the fabled Atlantis, dreams of Eldorado, and asks —

“ Wide Afric, doth thy Sun
Lighten, thy hills unfold a city as fair
As those which starred the night of the elder world?
Or is the rumour of thy Timbuctoo
A dream as frail as those of ancient time? ”

He is wondering whether the reality of some such

¹ *Life of Sir James Fitzjames Stephen*, by Leslie Stephen.

glorious vision may not be hidden far in the recesses of the dark Continent. To him appears the Spirit of the Ideal, symbolising

“The permeating life which courses through
All th’ intricate and labyrinthine veins
Of the great mine of Fable,”

and shows him a river winding through

“The argent streets of the city, imaging
The soft inversion of her tremulous domes.”

But

“The time has well nigh come
When I must render up this glorious home
To keen Discovery,”

when the brilliant towers shall shrink and shiver into huts

“Black specks amid a waste of dreary sand
Low-built, mud-walled, barbarian settlements.
How changed from this fair city !”

This, the first poem of Tennyson, is worth notice because it contains in embryo the qualities which emerge in his later verse, his delight in picturesque and luxuriant description, his meditative power of falling into moods which give full scope, as in a trance or dream, to the roving imagination; his manner of presenting ideas symbolically. Although Charles Wordsworth wrote of it that at Oxford the poem might have qualified its author for a lunatic asylum, Arthur Hallam, who was beaten in the competition, laid stress, in a letter to W. E. Gladstone, on its “splendid imaginative power,” and said that he considered Tennyson as “promising fair to be the greatest poet of our generation” — a remarkably far-seeing pre-

diction to have been built on so slender a foundation. A review in the *Athenæum* (at that time under the joint-editorship of John Sterling and Frederick Maurice) declared that it "indicated really first-rate poetical genius, which would have done honour to any man that ever wrote." The poem, in blank verse, was recited in the Senate House by the late Dean Merivale, since the ordeal was too much for Tennyson's habitual diffidence.

The *Memoir* has preserved for us several poems written by Tennyson at Cambridge (1828-1831) that were never published. In one of these, "Anacaona," which was suppressed (we are told) because the natural history and the rhymes did not satisfy him, the verses are full of glowing tropical scenery; but at that time he did not care for absolute descriptive accuracy. The scientific spirit, in fact, had not yet laid its hold on him; and the following stanza, given here as a sample, shows that he was taking his juvenile pleasure in sumptuous colouring and in sounding versification—

"In the purple island,
 Crown'd with garlands of cinchona,
 Lady over wood and highland,
 The Indian queen, Anacaona,
 Dancing on the blossomy plain
 To a woodland melody:
 Playing with the scarlet crane,
 The dragon-fly and scarlet crane,
 Beneath the papao tree!
 Happy, happy was Anacaona,
 The beauty of Espagnola.
 The golden flower of Hayti!"

The "Song of the three Sisters" is in the same early manner, yet it clearly presages his later dithy-

rambic style; and the blank verse in the prelude exhibits the undeveloped quality of an artist in romantic landscape-painting —

“The North wind fall’n, in the new-starréd night
 Zidonian Hanno, wandering beyond
 The hoary promontory of Soloë,
 Past Thymiaterion in calméd bays
 Between the southern and the western Horn,
 Heard neither warbling of the nightingale,
 Nor melody o’ the Libyan Lotus-flute
 Blown seaward from the shore ; but from a slope
 That ran bloom-bright into the Atlantic blue,
 Beneath a highland leaning down a weight
 Of cliffs, and zoned below with cedar-shade,
 Came voices like the voices in a dream
 Continuous — till he reach’d the outer sea.”

Another piece may be worth quoting, as the first indication of the brooding philosophic mind that is reflected through so much of Tennyson’s poetry —

“Thou may’st remember what I said
 When thine own spirit was at strife
 With thine own spirit. ‘From the tomb
 And charnel-place of purpose dead,
 Thro’ spiritual dark we come
 Into the light of spiritual life.’

 God walk’d the waters of thy soul,
 And still’d them. When from change to change,
 Led silently by power divine,
 Thy thought did scale a purer range
 Of prospect up to self-control,
 My joy was only less than thine.”

In these lines we have the contemplative mood struggling into as yet imperfect metrical expression; and the two foregoing quotations may be taken to

illustrate two salient characteristics of all Tennyson's poetry — his delight in external beauty, and the inward uneasiness of a mind oppressed by the enigma of human existence, yet finding solace in a kind of spiritual quietism, and in the glimmer of light somewhere far beyond the surrounding darkness.

CHAPTER II

POEMS, 1830-1842

BEFORE he left Cambridge (where he did not wait for a degree), his "Poems, chiefly Lyrical," were published. It has already been observed that a group of original poets take up the whole ground of their generation; they so act upon their audience, and are again reacted upon sympathetically, that, for a time, nothing new is said or shaped. This may account, in some degree, for the barren interval that may be noticed in the annals of a country's literature; there was one such interval at the end of the eighteenth century, when the era of classic composition had closed, and the Romantic spirit, just born, had as yet become hardly articulate; and since the closing years of the nineteenth century another dearth of poetry has set in. At the present moment the field is still held by Tennyson and Browning, nor has their challenger yet appeared in the lists.

When Tennyson came forward in 1830 the marvellous constellation of poets that illumined the first quarter of the century had almost vanished, in the sense of their work being finished; for although Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Scott were still alive, they had attained immortality; they were above and beyond the special influences of an altering world; they could not interpret or inform the aspirations or disquietudes of a younger generation. Those subtle,

indefinable modifications of style and feeling, continuous yet always changing, which go on in the world and around us, are nowhere more clearly perceptible than in poetry: the impress of a great master in any art deeply affects his immediate successors; but he has almost always given his best to his contemporaries in early manhood, and the school which he has founded can do little more than imitate him. When, as in Tennyson's case, he keeps the field and retains his productive powers for more than half a century, he may be likened to a great spreading tree that checks the upspring of vigorous undergrowth; he remains the model and criterion of poetic excellence. Yet an unconscious feeling that the vein has been nearly worked out produces the desire for novelty; while there is simultaneously a continuous growth of fresh ideas engendered by changing views of life, which demand their own interpreter, and have to fight hard for ascendancy against the established taste. Here may probably be found one reason why the established organs of criticism so often go wrong in their estimate of an original writer when he first comes before the public; they judge by a literary standard that is becoming superseded; they are out of touch with the movements of the advancing party; they often maintain a sound æsthetic tradition, but they are slow to amend or enlarge their laws in accordance with new feelings and methods; they notice shortcomings and irregularities, but they sometimes lack discernment of the very qualities which attract the poet's contemporaries.¹ We know that even Coleridge,

¹ An acute and very interesting dissertation on the development of æsthetic taste and fashion may be read in Mr. Arthur

though he saw much beauty in Tennyson's poems, said that he could scarcely scan the verses, and passed upon them the criticism that the new poet had begun to write poetry without very well knowing what metre is. On the other hand, however, Coleridge said in his *Table Talk* (April 1830) — "Mr. Tennyson's sonnets, such as I have read, have many of the characteristic excellences of Wordsworth and Southey." It was long before the *Quarterly Review*, which began by treating him with contempt, could find anything better for Tennyson than sarcastic approbation. Yet the article in *Blackwood*, on his first volume, by "Christopher North," does show considerable discrimination, and on the whole, although Tennyson naturally resented it, must have been rather to his advantage than otherwise; for the critic undoubtedly hit with sharp but not unkindly ridicule the marks of affectation and lavish ornament that belonged to the poet's immaturity. Most of the pieces which *Blackwood* condemned were rightly omitted in subsequent editions; and in regard to those which he praised, the judgment has been generally upheld by later opinion. But a new writer's surest augury of future success is to be found in an ardent welcome by his contemporaries; it is a sign that he is not a mere imitator, however artistic, of past models, that he has caught the spirit and is quickening the emotions of the generation with which he has to live. Arthur Hallam wrote enthusiastically of the Lyrical Poems in the *Englishman's Magazine*; and in the *Westminster Review* John Bowring hailed the advent of an original poet, with powers that imposed upon him high Balfour's book on the *Foundations of Belief*, chap. ii. sections 1 and 2.

responsibility for the use of them. Some of the pieces contained in this first edition were omitted in subsequent reprints, though of these several reappeared later; and all that Tennyson decided to preserve stand in the latest collective edition under the title of "Juvenilia." Here, again, as throughout his later work, we have the poet's tendency to doubts and to gloomy meditation on man's short and sorrowful existence, side by side with a kind of rapturous delight in the beauties of nature and the glories of art. We have the "Confessions of a Sensitive Mind" that finds no comfort in creeds, and ends with the prayer for light —

"Oh teach me yet
Somewhat before the heavy clod
Weighs on me, and the busy fret
Of that sharp-headed worm begins
In the gross blackness underneath,"

followed closely by the brilliant vision of Oriental splendour in the "Recollections of the Arabian Nights,"

"Then stole I up, and trancedly
Gazed on the Persian girl alone,
Serene with argent-lidded eyes
Amorous, and lashes like to rays
Of darkness, and a brow of pearl
Tressed with redolent ebony,
In many a dark delicious curl,
Flowing beneath her rose-hued zone;
The sweetest lady of the time,
Well worthy of the golden prime
Of good Haroun Alraschid."

Verily a sight to dispel carking intellectual anxieties. It may be remarked, however, that in this

passage, as also in the amorous lyrics to Isabel and Madeline, which are full of delicate voluptuousness, the juvenile poet is too pictorial; his way of producing an image of lovely woman is by enumerating her charms; he describes beauty in detail as it might be painted, instead of describing its effects, as the great poets, from Homer downward, are usually content to do. Although Tennyson's natural artistic feeling corrected his earlier manner in this respect, yet the propensity to be descriptive, to elaborate a picture as a painter works upon his canvas, remained throughout a leading characteristic of his poetic style.

Soon after the publication of his first volume Tennyson made a journey to the Pyrenees, where he had some secret meetings with the Spanish refugees who, under Torrigo's leadership, were concerting the rash enterprise against the Spanish government that ended with the military execution of the whole party when they landed near Malaga in November 1831. He returned to live at Somersby, and about this time more verses were circulating among his friends, by whom, particularly by Arthur Hallam, he was urged to publish them. At Cambridge they received unanimous Apostolic benediction, with perpetual reading and diverse commentaries, until they were brought out toward the end of 1832. The "Lover's Tale," written in the poet's nineteenth year, and partly printed, was judiciously withdrawn from this issue at the last moment. A long poem in blank verse, betraying immaturities of style which the other pieces showed him to have outgrown, would have marred, as Tennyson himself said, the complete-

ness of the book, and would certainly have added more weight than worth to the collection. For this volume undoubtedly contains some of the most exquisite poetry that he ever wrote — “Mariana in the South,” “The Lady of Shalott,” and “The Palace of Art.”

His method of producing an impression by grouping details was used with great skill in these poems for scenic effects. In *Mariana in the Moated Grange* we see how a few words can take hold of and enchant the fancy until it conjures up images of the landscape, the mournful aspect of a decaying house in a level waste, the chill air of gray dawn, the varying moods of despondency that follow the alternations of sun and shadow, of light and darkness, as they pass before a solitary watcher who looks vainly for some one who never comes —

“About a stone-cast from the wall
 A sluice with blacken'd waters slept,
 And o'er it many, round and small,
 The cluster'd marish-mosses crept.
 Hard by a poplar shook alway,
 All silver-green with gnarled bark :
 For leagues no other tree did mark
 The level waste, the rounding gray.
 She only said, ‘ My life is dreary,
 He cometh not,’ she said ;
 She said, ‘ I am aweary, aweary,
 I would that I were dead ! ’ ”

This profusion of accurate detail in filling up the picture is very characteristic of Tennyson's manner, so different from Wordsworth's, who is usually content to

paint the background of his figures by a few strokes.¹ This rare power of giving atmosphere to a poem — of suggesting the correspondence and interaction between the mind and its surroundings, between the situation and the subjective feelings — comes out even more forcibly in *Mariana in the South*, where we have the troubled sleep in exhaustion produced by intense heat, with the dream of cool breezes and running brooks, and the waking to consciousness of bare desolation —

“She woke : the babble of the stream
 Fell, and, without, the steady glare
 Shrank one sick willow sere and small.
 The river-bed was dusty-white ;
 And all the furnace of the light
 Struck up against the blinding wall.”

To those who have been besieged and cooped up for many hours by the fierce sun beating against the walls of some dismal place of shelter, these lines will vividly recall a familiar sensation.

When this poem, first published in 1832, reappeared ten years later, it had been almost rewritten ; but by comparing the two versions one can see how Tennyson had pruned and condensed his style, always aiming at greater precision, and at producing the vivid impression in fewer words. It may be interesting to set the two opening stanzas of each version side by side.

¹ For example, in “*The Tables Turned — An Evening Scene*,” there is but one descriptive stanza —

“The sun, above the mountain’s head,
 A freshening lustre mellow
 Through all the long green fields has spread,
 His first sweet evening yellow.”

(1832)

“Behind the barren hills upsprung
 With pointed rocks against the
 light,
 The crag sharpshadowed overhung
 Each glaring creek and inlet
 bright.
 Far, far, one light blue ridge was
 seen,
 Looming like baseless fairyland
 Eastward a ship of burning sand,
 Dark rimmed with sea, and bare of
 green.
 Down in the dry salt-marshes stood
 That house dark-latticed. Not a
 breath
 Swayed the rich vineyard under-
 neath,
 Or moved the dusty southernwood.
 Madonna, with melodious moan,
 Sang Mariana, night and morn —
 Madonna, lo! I am all alone,
 Love-forgotten and love-forlorn.”

(1842)

“With one black shadow at its feet,
 The house thro’ all the level
 shines,
 Close-latticed to the brooding heat,
 And silent in its dusty vines:
 A faint-blue ridge upon the right,
 An empty river-bed before,
 And shallows on a distant shore,
 In glaring sand and inlets bright.
 But ‘Ave Mary,’ made she
 moan,
 And ‘Ave Mary,’ night and
 morn,
 And ‘Ah,’ she sang, ‘to be all
 alone,
 To live forgotten, and love
 forlorn.’”

In both versions the abundance of epithets is remarkable; there is hardly a substantive unqualified; but in the later version the description is less particular, and altogether much more compressed.

The moral of *The Palace of Art* is the insufficiency of external beauty to ward off the discontent, gradually sinking into despair, that invades a soul when it has planned out a life of godlike isolation among the most perfect creations of painting, statuary, and architecture. Form and colour, great historical portraits, splendid landscapes, the purity of marble, the rich light pouring in through stained glass, adorn the *Palace of Art*. The working out of such a design strains the power of descriptive poetry to its utmost effort; for here it enters into a kind of rivalry with

the sister arts on their own ground: the poet must imagine images; he is imitating Nature at second-hand, and is among all the snares that beset word-painting. Tennyson attempted, but abandoned, the arduous task of "doing a statue in verse"; he struck out the five stanzas introducing the statues of Elijah and Olympias; he shortened his catalogue and weeded out his gallery; and the alterations which the poem underwent in successive editions show the labour that it cost him. He thus succeeded in executing a series of exquisitely finished pictures, having in his mind, possibly, the Homeric shield of Achilles; though the scenes on the shield represent movement, as on a temple's frieze, whereas Tennyson portrays also single incidents, figures, or effects of still life, as in a great picture gallery:—

“And one, a full-fed river winding slow
 By herds upon an endless plain,
 The ragged rims of thunder brooding low,
 With shadow-streaks of rain.
 * * * * *
 Nor these alone, but every landscape fair,
 As fit for every mood of mind,
 Or gay, or grave, or sweet, or stern, was there
 Not less than truth design'd.”

In each stanza the keynote or *motif* is struck with a masterly power of suggestion, until we return to what poetry alone can express—the soul's delight in a representation of external beauty, and finally the intellectual weariness and spiritual prostration of the soul among all this outward magnificence.

“O all things fair to sate my various eyes!
 O shapes and hues that please me well!
 O silent faces of the Great and Wise,
 My Gods, with whom I dwell!”

Her godlike isolation sinks into a feeling of consternation at her solitude —

“As in strange lands a traveller walking slow,
In doubt and great perplexity,
A little before moon-rise hears the low
Moan of an unknown sea.”

Perfection of culture, Art for Art's sake, has no deep root in the heart of man, and flowers but to fade rapidly; it strikes a deep root only when it gives a moral representation of life.

Yet nothing is more rare or difficult than the presentation of some general truth, in prose or verse, by a story with inner significance, like the parables of a religious teacher. By symbolism, which is a more delicate instrument than metaphor, the second term of the comparison, the application of the narrative, is intimated but not expressed. If the meaning is vague or too much hidden, it is missed; if it is brought out too obviously, the mysterious charm disappears. In *The Lady of Shalott* we are not far below the high-water mark of symbolic poetry, the art which one of the latest schools of French poetry has been practising with doubtful success, being foiled mainly by the incurable lucidity and precision of the French language. The final version of this poem shows much less revision than in most of his early writings, although the careful pruning away of anything that might sound trivial or familiar is observable in such alterations as that whereby the Lady now writes her name “round about the prow,” instead of “below the stern,” where she wrote it originally, and where an ordinary boatman would have painted it. And since *The Lady of Shalott* is one of Tennyson's masterpieces, we may select it as an

example of his genius at a period when he had brought the form and conception of his poetry up to a point which he never afterward surpassed.

Undoubtedly his work is throughout elaborate, in the sense that he meditated long over the composition, and spared no pains to attain perfection. Tennyson arranged and polished indefatigably his blank verse, that purely English metre which more than any other gives scope to scientific construction, disdaining the adventitious aid of rhyme. The normal line consists, as every one knows, of five iambs marked not only by quantity but also by accentuation; and it is the mobility of the English accent, as compared with the regularity of prosodial notation, that gives such freedom to English verse, and is one of the elements that combine to make our language so excellent for poetry. And the skill of the consummate artist in blank verse finds its triumph in the infinite variety of measured sounds which he can draw from a five-stringed instrument that seems easy to play upon, yet is droning and tedious in all but a few hands.¹

The return, so noticeable in English poets of the nineteenth century, to the divine and heroic myths of ancient Greece, may be said to have begun with Keats, who endowed them with new life by the ardent play of his romantic imagination, and did it none the worse for his slight acquaintance with the originals. Tennyson continued a similar treatment of them with much more accurate knowledge. The concrete and sculptured figures of the antique legend or fable, in *Cenone*, *Ulysses*, and *Tithonus*, were endued with warmth and

¹See *Chapters on English Metre*, by J. B. Mayor (1886).

fresh colour by becoming the impersonations of the impulses and affections of modern life—love unrequited, lassitude, restlessness, the roaming spirit, the *ennui* of old age, philosophic ardour or serenity.

The poem of *Cenone* is the first of Tennyson's elaborate essays in a metre over which he afterwards obtained an eminent command. It is also the first of his idylls and of his classical studies, with their melodious rendering of the Homeric epithets and the composite words, which Tennyson had the art of coining after the Greek manner ("lily-cradled," "river-sundered," "dewy-dashed") for compact description or ornament. Several additions were made in a later edition; and the corrections then made show with what sedulous care the poet diversified the structure of his lines, changing the pauses that break the monotonous run of blank verse, and avoiding the use of weak terminals when the line ends in the middle of a sentence. The opening of the poem was in this manner decidedly improved; yet one may judge that the finest passages are still to be found almost as they stood in the original version; and the concluding lines, in which the note of anguish culminates, are left untouched:—

"O mother, hear me yet before I die.
Hear me, O earth. I will not die alone,
Lest their shrill happy laughter come to me
Walking the cold and starless road of Death
Uncomforted, leaving my ancient love
With the Greek woman."

Nevertheless the blank verse of *Cenone* lacks the even flow and harmonious balance of entire sections in the *Morte d'Arthur* or *Ulysses*, where the lines are swift or slow, rise to a point and fall gradually, in

cadences arranged to correspond with the dramatic movement, showing that the poet has extended and perfected his metrical resources. The later style is simplified; he has rejected cumbrous metaphor; he is less sententious; he has pruned away the flowery exuberance and lightened the sensuous colour of his earlier composition.

In the *Lotos-Eaters* we have an old Greek fable of wandering sailors reaching an unknown land of fruit and flowers; and the poem's rich long-drawn melody, with its profusion of scenic description, is in strong contrast to the quiet line and feeling of the Homeric narrative; where the impression is created by describing, not the environment, but its effect upon the men. "Whosoever did eat the honey-sweet fruit of the lotos had no more wish to bring tidings nor to come back, but there he chose to abide with the lotos-eating men, ever feeding on the lotos, and forgetful of his homeward way." Out of this the modern poet creates a splendid choric song, of way-worn mariners overcome by dreamy languor in a beautiful island, to whom their homes and their fatherland are becoming no more than a far-off memory. It may be that the ancient myth is a marvellous tradition of some real incident, when a shipwrecked crew settled down upon some island in a climate and among a people not unlike those which were discovered by the first European adventurers in the South Pacific Ocean; for even in the story of the Mutiny of the *Bounty* we can trace the influence of lotos-eating upon British sailors. The concluding strophe of the Ode as it now stands was substituted in 1843 for lines of a different structure and very inferior merit. The gods of Epicurus are the proper divinities

of the lotos-eaters; they look down carelessly through the clouds at the strife and misery of the world —

“Over wasted lands,
Blight and famine, plague and earthquake, roaring deeps and
fiery sands,
Clanging fights, and flaming towns, and sinking ships, and
praying hands.”

In the picture of luxurious repose as the ultimate bliss attainable both in this world and in heaven we have the shadow of the earth projected on the sky; it is that natural reflection of human experience and desires which is the common source of all primitive conceptions of a future existence.

The *Quarterly Review*¹ noticed these poems in a sarcastic article (by Kinglake, the author of *Eothen*) that missed all the beauties, yet hit the blots. That the criticism, although short-sighted enough as an appreciation, was yet salutary, is proved by the corrections afterwards made by Tennyson in passages where the thin partition that divides simplicity from triviality had been overstepped, or where the metre had not yet attained the strength and sure harmonic tones of his later workmanship. These old-fashioned reviewers, like the headmasters who ruled great public schools by incessant castigation, laboured honestly in their vocation of maintaining the classic traditions; and there was a masculine common-sense in their discipline that was by no means unwholesome. But for an example of impenitent conservatism and of insensibility to true genius, because it was new, the following sentence taken from an article in the *Quarterly Review*² upon the poems of Monckton Milnes is not easily to be matched: —

¹ 1839.

² *Ibid.*

“We are quite sure that he [Milnes] will hereafter obey one good precept in an otherwise doubtful decalogue :—

‘Thou shalt believe in Milton, Dryden, Pope,’

and regret few sins more bitterly than the homage he has now rendered at the fantastic shrines of such baby idols as Mr. John Keats and Mr. Alfred Tennyson.”

We have here the men who adore the great image of authority, and denounce all novelties as heretical. The reviewer adopts Byron’s creed, but overlooks Byron’s own triumphant desertion of it; for in his finest poems there is no trace of the great masters whom Byron professed to worship. He received a well-merited rebuke from J. S. Mill, who wrote in the *London Review* (1835) an article condemning the short-sighted incompetency of the *Quarterly’s* critic, recognising Tennyson as a true artist of high promise, and passing upon *The Lady of Shalott* a judgment in which the present writer ventures entirely to agree :—

“Except that the versification is less exquisite, ‘*The Lady of Shalott*’ is entitled to a place by the side of the ‘*Ancient Mariner*’ and ‘*Christabel*.’”

For it should not have been difficult to perceive that in this second volume of poems the promise and potency of Tennyson’s genius were clearly visible, and that the ascent was gradual because the aims were high. The blemishes often signified no more than exuberant strength; and James Montgomery’s observation of him at this stage is generally true as a standing test of latent powers in a beginner :—

“He has very wealthy and luxurious thought and great beauty of expression, and is *a poet*. But there is plenty of room for improvement, and I would have it so. Your trim

correct *young* writers seldom turn out well. A young poet should have a great deal which he can afford to throw away as he gets older.”¹

Although Tennyson's father died in 1831, he remained with the family at Somersby Rectory until 1837, making occasional visits elsewhere, to Mablethorpe on the bleak Lincolnshire coast, to London, and once crossing the sea to Holland for a journey up the Rhine to Cologne and Bonn. It was a tumultuous period in Continental no less than in English politics; and though Tennyson welcomed the Reform movement at home, he was in some trepidation lest it might open the floodgates of democracy upon the foundations of ancient institutions. “The instigating spirit of Reform,” he wrote, “will bring on the confiscation of Church property, and may be the downfall of the Church altogether; but the existence of the sect of St. Simonists in France is at once a proof of the immense mass of evil that is extant in the nineteenth century, and a focus which gathers all its rays.”² His hope of never seeing “St. Simon in the Church of Christ” has at any rate been amply fulfilled; and the mere apprehension shows that he had not yet, naturally, measured the difference between a religion and a scientific philosophy, or the former's incalculable superiority in the domain of things spiritual. In religion, as in politics, Tennyson's convictions gradually settled down into a hopeful optimism, occasionally shaken by fits of splenetic doubt and of discomfiture at the spectacle of human errors and misery. He believed in the remote eventual perfectibility of creeds and also of constitutions; but about this time the vanward clouds were

¹ *Memoir.*

² *Ibid.*

gathering on the political horizon, and he was never without some fear lest society might be caught unprepared in some sudden storm : —

“ Slowly comes a hungry people, as a lion, creeping nigher,
Glares at one that nods and winks behind a slowly-dying fire.”

This habit of cautious moderation and profound distrust of popular impatience, the dislike of excess or audacity in opinion which belongs to the contemplative artist, possessed Tennyson from youth to age, and occasionally lowered the temperature of his verse. Yet Tennyson, like Burke, had great confidence in the common-sense and inbred good-nature of the English people. Stagnation, he once said, is more dangerous than revolution. As he was throughout consistently the poet of the *via media* in politics, the dignified constitutional Laureate, so he was spared the changes that passed over the opinions of Wordsworth, Southey, and Coleridge, who were Radicals in their youth, and declined into elderly Tories. The temper of the times affected his poetry in a contrary way ; for his ardour rather increased with his age. He attained manhood in the middle of the calm period that followed the long, tumultuous years when all Europe was one vast battlefield, when the ardent spirits of Byron and Shelley had been fired by the fierce rallying of the European nations against Napoleon. It was the Crimean War, twenty years later, that first brought out Tennyson upon the battlefield ; while at home the subsidence of violent Radicalism encouraged his Liberal attitude toward internal politics.

In the autumn of 1833 came the news that Arthur Hallam, his dearest friend, who had been engaged to

Emily Tennyson, had died suddenly at Vienna, his last letter to Tennyson being dated a week before his death. Arthur Hallam may be counted among those men whom the unanimous consent of all their fellows marks out for high future distinction, and whose brilliant opening upon life, closed abruptly by early death, invests their memory with a kind of romance, explaining and almost justifying the antique conception of Fate and divine envy. Tennyson's heart was pierced with bitter sorrow, and filled with a sense of life's dreary insignificance. He wrote the first sections of his famous elegy upon his friend, and began that poem, *The Two Voices*, which takes up again the ancient strain of mortal man wrestling with the temptation to despair, when irremediable misfortune seems to render life nothing worth, a momentary existence destined to vanish into the cold oblivion that hides so many generations of the past.

The Memorial poem underwent many years of incubation. In the meantime Tennyson's mind was also on other poetic subjects. Sir Henry Taylor published in 1834 his drama of Philip van Artevelde, with a preface containing the author's views upon modern poetry in general, and some criticisms upon Byron and Shelley in particular. The essence of his dissertation was that "poetry is Reason self-sublimed," that Byron's verse was too unreasonably passionate, the product of personal vanity unbridled by sober sense and study; and that Shelley let his fancy run riot in melodious rhapsodies. It was the somewhat austere judgment of a cultured intellect upon the romantic revival, which was representing the demand for liberty and a wider range of ideas in art, as the Liberal move-

ment did in politics, among the poets whom Taylor designated as the Phantastic school. Tennyson's observation upon these criticisms is just and far-seeing: —

“I close with Taylor in most that he says of modern poetry, though it may be that he does not take sufficiently into consideration the peculiar strength evolved by such writers as Byron and Shelley, who, however mistaken they may be, did yet give the world another heart and new pulses, and so we are kept going. Blessed be those who grease the wheels of the old world, insomuch that to move on is better than standing still.”¹

No man, as we know, was less disposed than Tennyson to undervalue intellectual serenity or rhythmic perfection; yet he saw that Byron, with the fiery impetus of his careless verse, and Shelley, with his strong-winged flights into the realms of phantasy, were men of daring genius who had quickened the pace and widened the imaginative range of English poetry.

During these years Tennyson was living in retirement at Somersby. His correspondence, then and always, appears to have been so rare and fitful that it creates a serious difficulty for the ordinary biographer, who misses the connected series of letters that provide so important and interesting a clue to be followed in tracing the incidents, the opinion on passing events, the interchange of literary and political impressions, in the lives of illustrious or notable men. For paucity of correspondence Tennyson is indeed singular among modern English poets. Cowper, Scott, and Byron stand in the foremost rank of our letter-writers, and their correspondence is in volumes; while Matthew

¹ *Memoir.*

Arnold has actually predicted that Shelley's letters might survive his poems. Coleridge's familiar letters are amusing, pathetic, and reflective, full of a kind of divine simplicity; he is alternately indignant and remorseful; he soars to themes transcendent, and sinks anon to the confession of his errors and embarrassments. Wordsworth's letters contain rural scenery and lofty moral sentiment. They all belonged to the rapidly diminishing class of eminent men who have freely poured their real sentiments and thoughts out of their brain into correspondence with friends, giving their best without keeping back their worst, so that we can follow the stages of their lives and thoughts; and the letters thus preserve for us the clear-cut stamp of their individuality. The occasional letters of Tennyson given in the *Memoirs* are characteristic and entertaining, thrown off usually in the light play of wit and good-humour; but for early glimpses of him we have to rely mainly upon the letters or reminiscences of his friends. In 1835 he was with the Speddings in the Lake country, where he met Hartley Coleridge, who, "after the fourth bottom of gin, deliberately thanked Heaven for having brought them acquainted,"¹ and wrote a sonnet in celebration thereof. A visit to Wordsworth at Rydal Mount he would not then be persuaded to undertake, though the Laureate of the day and his successor did come together at a dinner party a few years later. Mr. Aubrey de Vere has described the meeting;² and he has told us that Wordsworth soon afterwards wrote in a letter to a friend that Tennyson was "decidedly the first of our living poets." In connection with this incident Mr.

¹ *Memoir*.

² *Ibid*.

de Vere is reminded of a conversation with Tennyson, who was enthusiastic over the songs of Burns — “You forget, for their sake, those stupid things, his serious pieces.” The same day Mr. de Vere met Wordsworth, who praised Burns even more vehemently than Tennyson had done, but ended — “Of course, I refer to his serious efforts; those foolish little amatory songs of his one has to forget.”

After 1837 the Tennyson family changed their residence more than once, first migrating from Somersby to High Beech in Epping Forest, and thence in 1840 to Tunbridge Wells. Tennyson made various excursions about England; and at Warwick he met again FitzGerald, who had been with him in the Lake country, when they visited together Kenilworth and Stratford-on-Avon, where Tennyson, seized with enthusiasm, wrote his name among those scribbled all over the room in which Shakespeare was born — “a little ashamed of it afterwards.” He came by Coventry to London, and composed *Godiva*, of which Charles Sumner, the American, wrote to Monckton Milnes that it was “unequaled as a narrative in verse”; he also went to Bolton Abbey and North Wales, leading a tranquil and contemplative life in a period of political and ecclesiastical agitation, sedulously husbanding his powers, meditating on the problems of existence, and collecting impressions in his journeys about England. He was far from being indifferent to current politics or theological controversies; he took a close interest in the Oxford Movement; nor did he make light of the grievances and demonstrations of the Chartists. Yet his attitude seems to have been that of the philosophic spectator who surveys from a height

the field of action; he did not fling himself into the fighting line, like Byron or Shelley, whose poetry glows with the fiery enthusiasm of combatants in the strife over political or religious causes and ideas, or like Coleridge, who declared that all the social evils of his day arose from a false and godless empiricism, and anxiously expounded to Lord Liverpool the essential connection between speculative philosophy and practical politics.¹ The two short poems that were suggested (we are told) by the Reform agitation are in a tone of moderate conservatism: he praises the freedom that slowly broadens down from precedent to precedent; he despises the "falsehood of extremes"; and just as in Locksley Hall may be noticed a listening fear of mob rule, so in his poem *Love thou thy Land*, he is a cautious Liberal, ready to do much for the people, but very little by the people —

" But pamper not a hasty time,
 Nor feed with crude imaginings
 The herd, wild hearts and feeble wings,
 That every sophister can lime " —

and his abhorrence of precipitate politics comes out in almost every allusion to France.

In his religious speculations he ponders over the question why God has created souls, knowing that they would sin and suffer, and finds it unanswerable except in that firm hope of universal good as the outcome, which is the reasoned conclusion of those who find the design of human life in this world unintelligible, unless another world is brought in to redress the balance, and which is thus the mainspring and support of belief in a future existence. There are

¹ See a wonderful letter in *Lord Liverpool's Life*, vol. ii. p. 302.

passages in the letters written about this time to Miss Emily Sellwood, during the long engagement that preceded their marriage, that indicate the bent of his mind toward philosophic questions, with frequent signs of that half-conscious fellow-feeling with natural things, the "dim, mystic sympathies with tree and hill reaching far back into childhood," that sense of life in all sound and motion, whereby poetry is drawn upward, by degrees and instinctively, into the region of the higher Pantheism. "Sculpture," he writes, "is particularly good for the mind; there is a height and divine stillness about it which preaches peace to our stormy passions."¹ Nor has any English poet availed himself more skilfully of a language that is rich in metaphors consisting of words that so far retain their primary meaning as to suggest a picture while they convey a thought.

The preservation of the rough drafts and rejected versions of passages and lines in poems of high finish, for the purpose of showing the artist at work, may not be altogether fair to him, and the practice in some recent editions of giving them in footnotes is rather distracting to those readers who enjoy a fine picture without asking how the colours are mixed. And when each page of fine verse is also garnished with references, with minute explanations of the most familiar allusion, and with parallel quotations from other standard poets, the worried reader is painfully reminded of his early school-books. Tennyson's poems have never yet been footnoted in this fashion, although no poet has corrected or revised more diligently; but the successive editions, which bear

¹ *Memoir.*

witness to his alterations, have been studiously compared more than once. To students of method, to the fellow-craftsman, and to the literary virtuoso, the variant readings may often be of substantial interest for the light they throw on the tendencies and predilections of taste which are the formative influences upon style in prose or poetry. It is from such materials that one can follow the processes of Tennyson's composition, the forming and maturing of his style, the fastidious discrimination which dictated his rejection of any work that either did not throughout satisfy a high standard, or else marred a poem's symmetrical proportion by superfluity, overweight, or the undue predominance of some note in the general harmony. One may regret that some fine stanzas or lines should have been thus expunged, yet the impartial critic would probably confirm the decision in every instance. He acted, as we perceive, inexorably upon his rule that the artist is known by his self-limitation, feeling certain, as he once said, that "if I mean to make any mark in the world, it must be by shortness, for the men before me had been so diffuse." Only the concise and perfect work, he thought at this time, would last; and "hundreds of verses were blown up the chimney with his pipe smoke, or were written down and thrown into the fire as not being perfect enough." ¹ Not many poems could have spared the four stanzas with which the "Dream of Fair Women" originally began, and which E. FitzGerald quotes in an early letter as in Tennyson's "best style, no fretful epithet, not a word too much." It opens thus:—

¹ *Memoir.*

“As when a man that sails in a balloon,
 Down-looking sees the solid shining ground
 Stream from beneath him in the broad blue noon,
 Tilt, hamlet, mead, and mound :

* * * * *
 So, lifted high, the poet at his will
 Lets the great world flit from him, seeing all,
 Higher, thro' secret splendours mounting still,
 Self-poised, nor fears to fall.”

Yet one can see that the simile is unnecessary, and to a certain degree out of line with the general conception of a vision that passes in the night. He would strike out stanzas because they made a poem too “long-backed”; and he resolutely condemned to excision from the original Palace of Art some excellent verses, merely to give the composition even balance, and to trim the poem like a boat. This poem, in fact, was in a large part rewritten, for Tennyson evidently thought that too much brilliancy and opulence in the decoration of his Palace might run into gorgeousness. He withdrew two or three such stanzas as this:—

“With piles of flavoured fruit in basket-twined
 Of gold, upheaped, crushing down
 Musk-scented blooms, all taste, grape, gourd, or pine
 In bunch, or single grown.”

And this other stanza may have been omitted because the didactic or scientific note is rather too prominent:—

“All nature widens upward. Evermore
 The simpler essence lower lies,
 More complex is more perfect, owning more
 Discourse, more widely wise.”

At any rate, the preservation of these rejections (in the *Memoir*) serves to illustrate the gradual development of consummate technique; nor has it in this

instance damaged the artist, for we may rank Tennyson among the very few poets whose reputation would rather gain than suffer by the posthumous appearance of pieces that the author had deliberately withheld or withdrawn.

From 1833 the publication of more poetry was suspended, though not the writing of it. In one of E. FitzGerald's letters (March 1842) we have the following passage:—

“Poor Tennyson has got home some of his proof-sheets, and now that his verses are in hard print, he thinks them detestable. There is much I had always told him of—his great fault of being too full and complicated—which he now sees, or fancies he sees, and wishes he had never been persuaded to print. But with all his faults, he will publish such a volume as has never been published since the time of Keats, and which, once published, will never be suffered to die. This is my prophecy, for I live before Posterity.”

And indeed the fallow leisure of this period bore an ample harvest; for after an interval of ten years the full growth and range of his genius came out in the two volumes of 1842. The first of these contained a selection from the poems of 1830, with others, much altered, which had appeared in 1832, and several new pieces. In the second volume all was entirely new, except three stanzas of “The Day Dream.”

“This decade,” writes his biographer, “wrought a marvellous abatement of my father's real fault—the tendency, arising from the fulness of mind which had not yet learned to master its resources freely, to overcrowd his compositions with imagery, to which may be added over-indulgence in the luxury of the senses.”¹

The criticism is just, for these new poems did undoubtedly attest the poet's rapid development of mind and

¹ *Memoir.*

methods, the expansion of his range of thought, his increasing command over the musical instrument, and the admirable vigour and beauty that his composition was now disclosing. He had the singular advantage, rarely enjoyed so early in a poetic career, of being surrounded by enthusiastic friends who were also very competent judges of his work, whose unanimous verdict must have given his heart real confidence; so that the few spurts of cold water thrown on him by professional reviewers no longer troubled him seriously. The darts of such enemies might hardly reach or wound one round whom such men as Hallam, James Spedding, Edward FitzGerald, the two Lushingtons, Blakesley, and Julius Hare rallied eagerly. Wordsworth, who at first had been slow to appreciate, having afterwards listened to two poems recited by Aubrey de Vere, did "acknowledge that they were very noble in thought, with a diction singularly stately." Even Carlyle, who had implored the poet to stick to prose, was vanquished, and wrote (1842) a letter so vividly characteristic as to justify, or excuse, another quotation from the *Memoir* :—

"DEAR TENNYSON, — Wherever this find you, may it find you well, may it come as a friendly greeting to you. I have just been reading your Poems; I have read certain of them over again, and mean to read them over and over till they become my poems; this fact, with the inferences that lie in it, is of such emphasis in *me*, I cannot keep it to myself, but must needs acquaint you too with it. If you knew what my relation has been to the thing call'd English 'Poetry' for many years back, you would think such fact almost surprising! Truly it is long since in any English Book, Poetry or Prose, I have felt the pulse of a real man's heart as I do in this same.

* * * * *

“I know you cannot read German : the more interesting is it to trace in your ‘Summer Oak’ a beautiful kindred to something that is best in Goethe ; I mean his ‘Müllerinn’ (Miller’s daughter) chiefly, with whom the very Mill-dam gets in love ; tho’ she proves a flirt after all and the thing ends in satirical lines ! Very strangely too in the ‘Vision of Sin’ I am reminded of my friend Jean Paul. This is not babble, it is speech ; true deposition of a volunteer witness. And so I say let us all rejoice somewhat. And so let us all smite rhythmically, all in concert, ‘the sounding furrows’ ; and sail forward with new cheer, ‘beyond the sunset,’ whither we are bound.”

The allusion at the end of his letter is, of course, to Tennyson’s Ulysses, which Carlyle quoted again (1843) in *Past and Present*. He is recalling the concluding lines of this grand monologue, where the old warrior, who embodies the spirit of heroic adventure in the primitive world, and whose manhood has been spent in twenty years’ war and travel, breaks away from the monotonous inactivity of life on a small island, and fares forth again as a sea-rover. The Odyssey and the Iliad are the unsurpassed models of all true epical narrative ; the poet chooses certain incidents and actions that bring out character, that unite to frame a coherent picture of men and their times ; and when the plot has been worked out to its *dénouement*, the story in each poem, as also in Milton’s Paradise Lost, drops naturally to a quiet ending ; to go further would have been a breach of the poem’s unity. Yet the stamp of character is so firmly set upon Ulysses that the mind of man has never since been content with leaving him to a home-keeping old age in Ithaca ; and one would almost as soon believe that Napoleon might have settled down placidly in

Elba or St. Helena. Dante takes up, in the spirit of the age that produced Marco Polo, the post-Homeric legend of Ulysses sailing from Circe's island, near Gaeta, out of the Mediterranean westward into the "unpeopled world" of the Atlantic Ocean, impelled by an ardent desire to explore the unseen and unknown.¹ On the other hand, Tennyson's hero has reached home, and has given family life a fair trial, but he finds it so dull that he is soon driven by sheer *ennui* to his ship, purposing to sail beyond the sunset and return no more. He exhorts his old comrades, as in Dante, to follow knowledge and make the most of the short life remaining to them all. As a point of minor criticism, it may here be noticed that in taking Ithaca instead of Circe's island as the place of departure on this final voyage, the English poet may have forgotten that before the Homeric Ulysses landed in Ithaca, a solitary man, every one of his companions with whom he left Troy had perished by sea or land during the long wandering. But fidelity to the original tradition is of no account in a poem that is independent of time and place. Our poet may have felt that he was touching a chord in the heart of the restless Englishman, who is seldom content with leisurely ease after many years of working and wandering abroad —

¹ This legend is partly confirmed, in a curious way, by careful recent investigations into the Mediterranean geography of the *Odyssey*, which have located, with much probability, the island of Calypso, the daughter of *Atlas*, on the north-west coast of Africa, near the Strait of Gibraltar. It is noticed, among other indications, that Calypso enjoined Ulysses to keep the north star always on his left in sailing back toward Ithaca, and that he followed this eastward course for eighteen days.

“The long mechanic pacings to and fro,
The set gray life, and apathetic end,”

are not for men of this temper. Whether they are chiefs of a petty Greek island, or citizens of a vast empire whose frontiers are constantly advancing, for them it is true that

“All experience is an arch wherethro’
Gleams that untravell’d world, whose margin fades
For ever and for ever when I move ;”

and Ulysses is the primeval type of the indefatigable rover for whom the *Juventus Mundi* provided unlimited regions of adventure, but whose occupation will soon be gone when the uttermost corners of the earth shall have been explored. Ancient myth, mediæval epic, popular ballads, retain and hand down the figures of such men, as they were stamped on the imagination of the times; and Tennyson’s poem gives us the persistent character, blended with and accorded to modern feelings.

Ulysses is perhaps the finest, in purity of composition and in the drawing of character, among Tennyson’s dramatic monologues. Of his other classical studies, *Tithonus* is one of the most beautiful conceptions of the mythologic Greek mind reset in harmonious verse — a fable that may be interpreted variously; whether of the desolate sadness that would be the penalty of surviving, the mere relic of a man, into a strange and distant generation —

“A white-hair’d shadow roaming like a dream,”

or as a parable upon the melancholy futility and disappointment that may follow the coupling of blooming youth with extreme old age.

“How can my nature longer mix with thine ?
Coldly thy rosy shadows bathe me, cold
Are all thy lights, and cold my wrinkled feet.”¹

On the other hand, it is “the passionless bride, divine Tranquillity,” whom Tennyson’s Lucretius, wrestling with the satyr, vainly woos on earth, preferring at last to seek her by death in the high Roman fashion, and trusting that

“My golden work in which I told a truth
That stays the rolling Ixionian wheel,
And numbs the Fury’s ringlet-snake, and plucks
The mortal soul from out immortal hell,
Shall stand,”

as assuredly it has stood and will endure. In these dramatic studies from the antique the single Roman figure is Lucretius, the only Latin poet who boldly grappled with those profound religious and philosophical enigmas that were always perplexing Tennyson’s meditations, and whose conclusions must have been no less deeply interesting to him because they were so different from his own.

The march of blank verse, flowing onward with its sonorous rhythm, is well suited to these monologues. Tennyson, who believed that “Keats, with his high spiritual vision, would have been, had he lived, the greatest of us all,”² observed also that his blank verse lacked originality of movement. It is true that

¹ Compare the Spanish epigram on a rainy dawn —

“Quando sale la Aurora
Sale llorada,
Pobrecita, que noche
Habra pasada !”

² *Memoir.*

Keats, who died before his metrical skill could be perfected, followed evidently the Miltonic construction; nevertheless, he stands in the foremost rank, if not first, among the nineteenth-century poets who may be said to have refreshed blank verse by a new exhibition of its resources for varied harmonies. And we may recognise an affinity, in cadence and rich colouring, between the first part of *Hyperion* and Tennyson's compositions in the same metre, whenever he takes for his theme some legend of antiquity. We may reckon, moreover, Keats as Tennyson's forerunner in the romantic handling of classic subjects, with a fanciful freedom not restrained by the scholarship that kept Tennyson closer to his models, and made him aim at preserving more closely the thought, to the extent of occasionally reproducing the very form and translating the language, of the Greek originals.¹ Both poets had the gift of intense susceptibility to the beauties of Nature, and with both of them the primitive myths were coloured by the magic of romance. But Tennyson's art shows more plainly the influence of a time that delights in that precision of details which the eighteenth-century poetry had avoided, preferring elegant generalities and elevated sentiments in polished verse. His work is essentially picturesque, in the sense that he could use words as the painter uses his brush for conveying the impression of a scene's true outline and colour; he can venture upon accurate description. The subjoined fragment, written on revisiting Mablethorpe, contains the quintessence of his descriptive style; the last three lines are sheer landscape painting.

¹ "Far on the ringing plains of windy Troy."

“ Here often when a child I lay reclined :
 I took delight in this fair strand and free ;
 Here stood the infant Ilion of the mind,
 And here the Grecian ships all seem'd to be.
 And here again I come, and only find
The drain-cut level of the marshy lea,
Gray sand-banks, and pale sunsets, dreary wind,
Dim shores, dense rains, and heavy-clouded sea.”

So also in *The Palace of Art* the desolate soul is likened to

“ A still salt pool, lock'd in with bars of sand ;
 Left on the shore ; that hears all night
 The plunging seas draw backward from the land
 Their moon-led waters white.”

Here every word is like a stroke of the painter's brush, put in to complete the sketch and to round off the impression ; and this, as has been already observed, is characteristic of all Tennyson's workmanship ; he does not give the effect of the scene, but the scene itself. For the different method of conveying to the mind's eye the scene through its effect, we may compare

“ In such a night
 Stood Dido with a willow in her hand
 Upon the wild sea banks, and waved her love
 To come again to Carthage.”

In the volumes of 1842 one remarkable feature of the new poems is the diversity of subjects and *motifs*. The second volume opens with the *Morte d'Arthur*, wherein Tennyson first tried his art upon the legends that are to be gathered upon the shores of old romance, enlarging the picture, and filling up his canvas with a profusion of exquisite detail, the sights and the sounds, the figures of the king and his knights, the

ruined shrine, the lake in the full moon, the clanging of Sir Bedivere's armour, the ripple of the water on the bank. The earliest romances had none of this ornament; they relied on the energetic simplicity with which a bard might relate what was said and done in some tragic emergency; their interest centred in the acts and incidents; they had little care for the descriptive setting of their narratives in landscape or supplementary decoration; their religion was miraculous and almost wholly external. Tennyson retains the dramatic situation, and treats it in a manner that satisfies the modern sensibility to deeper thoughts and suggestions, to the magic of scenery, to that delight in bygone things which is the true romantic feeling in an age when enchanted swords and fairy queens are no longer marvellous realities, and can only be preserved for poetic use as mystic visions. Arthur and his knights have fallen in their last battle; but the Round Table was "an image of the mighty world" in which the old order changes, giving place to new; they have lived their time and done their work; and so the legendary king vanishes, uncertain whither he may be going, into some restful Elysium.

One feature of the collection in this volume is the variety of subject and character. After the *Morte d'Arthur*, the last scene of a lost epic, come two rustic pastorals of the present day, *The Gardener's Daughter* and *Dora*; the latter remarkable for its pathetic simplicity, without one superfluous epithet or streak of colour, insomuch that Wordsworth is recorded to have thus spoken of it — "Mr. Tennyson, I have been endeavouring all my life to write

a pastoral like your Dora, and have not succeeded." And FitzGerald wrote that as an eclogue it came near the Book of Ruth. Wordsworth's pastorals, though of the highest quality, are constructed differently from Tennyson's; he tells a plain story or more often relates an incident, for the purpose of bringing out some single note of human feeling, the touch of nature that makes us all akin, and upon this he moralises reflectively. Next after Dora follow three sketches of quiet strolling through English fields, Audley Court, Walking to the Mail, and Edwin Morris. The mail comes in sight, "as quaint a four-in-hand as you shall see — three piebalds and a roan." We start with Edwin Morris and his friend by the lake, to hear

"The soft wind blowing over meadowy holms
 * * * * * * *
 While the prime swallow dips his wing, or then
 While the gold-lily blows, and overhead
 The light cloud smoulders on the summer crag."

All these poems lap us in the caressing air of rural England at its best. Turn the page, and before us is St. Simeon Stylites, the type of wild Oriental asceticism, praying from the top of his pillar amid rain, wind, and frost; "from scalp to sole one slough and crust of sin,"

"Battering the gates of heaven with storms of prayer."

The poet has leapt back out of English fields into the Egyptian desert. From this picture of suicidal misery and fierce mortification of the senses we pass abruptly to the idyllic love poem of the Talking Oak in an old

English park; and the next leap is again still further backward into the primitive world of Ulysses, the hard-headed fighting man,

“strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.”

With this note of heroic character in the foretime struck by the concluding lines of Ulysses we again turn over a leaf, and are confronted in Locksley Hall by the irresolute figure of modern youth, depressed and bewildered by his own inability to face the bustling competition of ordinary English life, disappointed in love, denouncing a shallow-hearted cousin, and nursing a momentary impulse to

“wander far away,
On from island unto island at the gateways of the day.”

Restlessness, *ennui*, impatience of humdrum existence, set him dreaming of something like a new Odyssey. But the hero of Locksley Hall is no Ulysses; the bonds of culture and comfort are too strong for him; the project of wild adventure is abandoned as quickly as it is formed; he remains to console himself with the march of mind and the wonders of scientific discovery. The contrast of ancient and modern character and circumstance was probably unintentional; but in noticing it we may take into account that while the Englishman had been crossed in love, the Ithacan had been remarkably successful with Circe and Calypso, and appears to have been always well treated by women, who may be overcome, like the rest of the world, by stalwart perseverance. The great and lasting success of Locksley Hall shows the power of genius

in presenting an ordinary situation poetically; how it can kindle up and transform common emotions, dealing boldly with the facts and feelings of everyday life. As a composition it has great original merit: the even current of blank verse is put aside for a swinging metre, new in English poetry, with rhymed couplets, passionate and picturesque, which follow one another like waves; each of them running directly to its point; and the long nervous lines sustain the rise and fall of varying moods. They stand now almost exactly as they were written originally, with one correction that greatly improved what is now a singularly powerful line.¹

That a poem which is steeped in the quintessence of modern sentiment—an invective in Rousseau's vein against a corrupt society—should be connected by origin with the early poetry of the Arabian desert, is a notable example of the permanence and transmission of forms. We know from the *Memoir* that Tennyson took his idea (he said) of Locksley Hall from the *Moallakât*, the Suspended poems, composed by Arab bards in or about the seventh century of our era, and hung up in the Temple at Mecca. They are on different themes, but all of them begin with what is called the *nasib*, a melancholy reflection on deserted dwellings or camping-grounds, that once were the scene of love and stolen meetings. Here we have the opening prelude of Locksley Hall; and in the first of the seven poems is to be found the allusion to the Pleiades with its metaphor; while other resemblances can be traced

¹“Let the peoplespin for ever down the ringing grooves of change” (1842) altered to

“Let the *great world* spin for ever,” etc.

in the mother's worldly counsel to her daughter, and in the ending of both pieces with a storm.¹

One might almost regard *The Two Voices* as continuing in a deeper philosophic key the melancholy musing of *Locksley Hall*, and the two poems might then be labelled "Dejection." There is a similar disconsolate protest against the vanity and emptiness of life; there is the feeling of doubt and disillusion, the sombre self-examination; and that same vague longing for the battlefield as a remedy for the morbid sensibility that haunts so many studious men, which reappears later in *Maud*. And the poem ends like *In Memoriam*, with a revival of faith and hope under the influences of calm natural beauty, of household affections, and the placid ways of ordinary humanity. It is a soothing doctrine, and a wholesome medicine for the moodiness and ailments, the weariness of mere brainwork, that occasionally disturb a sequestered and uneventful existence; though it would hardly minister to more

¹ These parallels have been pointed out to me by Sir Charles Lyall, to whom all Arabic poetry is familiar, and whose own version of the couplet on the Pleiades is here placed side by side with Tennyson's stanza, for a comparison that is by no means to the disadvantage of the Arabian. It may be observed that the metrical arrangement of the original Arabic verse, by which each long line is composed of two hemistichs, giving a pause in the middle, and each couplet is complete in itself, is not unlike the movement of the English verse, and may have suggested it.

Tennyson.

"Many a night I saw the Pleiades, rising through the mellow shade,
Glitter like a swarm of fireflies tangled in a silver braid."

Imra-al-Kais.

"What time in the Eastern heavens the Pleiades clomb the sky
Like the jewelled clasps of a girdle aslant on a woman's waist."

perilous mental diseases, or relieve the perplexities of Hamlet. One stanza in *The Two Voices* —

“ ‘ Consider well,’ the voice replied,
 ‘ His face, that two hours since hath died ;
 Wilt thou find passion, pain or pride ? ’ ”

recalls the masculine attitude of an age which, though inferior in poetic imagination, was perhaps for that very reason less troubled by thick-coming fancies —

“ A soul supreme in each hard instance tried,
 Above all pain, all passion, and all pride,
 The rage of power, the blast of public breath,
 The lust of lucre and the dread of death.”¹

And it is certainly refreshing, when two or three more pages of Tennyson's volume are turned, to find the spirit of undaunted faith and courage revived in the lofty stanzas of *Sir Galahad*, where the rhymes ring clear like strokes on a bell — a piece of consummate workmanship. We may compare the somewhat abject prostration of *Stylites* with the vigorous championship of his faith by the knight-errant —

“ My good blade carves the casques of men,
 My tough lance thrusteth sure ;
 My strength is as the strength of ten,
 Because my heart is pure.”

He stands here as a model of that purity and trustful piety which belong to the later conceptions of chivalry, when tales of enchantment were intermixed with the Christian mysteries. In the fragment of *Lancelot and Guinevere* we have the tone of the Renaissance, a picture of the courteous knight and his lady love set in a framework of brilliant English scenery, as they ride through the woods in the springtide of the year.

¹ Pope's "Epistle to the Earl of Oxford."

CHAPTER III

THE PRINCESS AND IN MEMORIAM

FROM 1842 to 1845 the sojourning of Tennyson in various parts of England and Ireland can be traced from his letters, which mention, however, few personal incidents, and allude rarely to public affairs. One of these refers to a trial of the water cure at Cheltenham; and in a letter of October 1844 to F. Tennyson, FitzGerald reports Alfred to be still there, "where he has been sojourning for two months, but he never writes me a word. Hydropathy has done its worst: he writes the names of his friends in water." At this time he had been persuaded by one Dr. Allen to put all his capital into a project of turning out wood-carving by machinery. By this whimsically rash investment he lost his money, a very serious blow to his prospects of marriage; and he fell ill with anxiety and vexation.¹

In 1845 Mr. Hallam had drawn Sir Robert Peel's attention to Tennyson's merits and slender means, when Peel offered a small grant of one sum, excusing his inability to provide more at that time; but Hallam treated this as inadequate. Soon after-

¹ FitzGerald writes (1845) — "Dr. Allen is dead; and A.T., having a life insurance and policy on him, will now, I hope, retrieve the greater part of his fortune again. Apollo certainly did this; shooting one of his swift arrows straight at the heart of the doctor, whose perfectly heartless conduct certainly upset A. T.'s nerves."

wards Carlyle's solemn warning to Monckton Milnes, who had already been moving in the matter, that his eternal salvation would depend at the Day of Judgment on his ability to answer the question why he did not get a pension for Alfred Tennyson, appears to have been effective, for in 1845 the annual grant of £200 was communicated to him by Sir Robert Peel as "a mark of royal favour to one who had devoted to worthy objects great intellectual powers." The minister was balancing the claims of Sheridan Knowles, who was aged and had done his work, against the rising genius, when Milnes sent to him *Locksley Hall* and *Ulysses*; and it was the reading of *Ulysses* by Milnes to Peel, we are told, that determined the recommendation, which was made without any kind of direct or indirect solicitation from the poet. He wrote to a friend:—

"Something in that word 'pension' sticks in my gizzard; it is only the name, and perhaps would 'smell sweeter' by some other. I feel the least bit possible Miss Martineauish about it. You know she refused one, saying she 'should be robbing the people, who did not make laws for themselves': however, that is nonsense. . . . If the people *did* make laws for themselves, if these things went by universal suffrage, what literary man ever would get a lift? it being notorious that the mass of Englishmen have as much notion of poetry as I of fox-hunting."¹

Herein, it may be observed, Tennyson does scant justice to the taste and to the generosity of the English people, who are at least as widely sensitive to fine poetry as any other modern nation, which is probably one reason why England has produced so much of it. Nor has an original genius, of strength and sincerity,

¹ *Memoir.*

ever had cause to fear the test of universal suffrage, if his themes have been, as with a great poet they always are, of a kind that are large and deep enough to touch all sorts and conditions of men: since no other art can compare with poetry at the highest level for its power of winning popularity. And this is the more remarkable when we remember that the poet of modern nations uses the language of a vast miscellaneous multitude, with complex tastes and in diverse conditions of life; whereas the masters of antique poetry had for their audience some comparatively small community, or a group of petty states and cities allied to them by kinship, in mind and manners alike, by whom the note, when sounded, was sure to be caught up. And so they were fortunate at first in "leaving great verse unto a little clan," to be preserved and handed down afterwards as the inheritance of all civilised peoples.

It was part of Tennyson's dubitating temperament that he planned out his foreign travels with interior misgivings, and with much wavering as to purpose and direction. FitzGerald writes (1845) that the poet "has been for six weeks intending to start every day for Switzerland or Cornwall, he does not know which"; and in 1846 we read again that he has been "for two weeks striving to spread his wings to Italy or Switzerland. It has ended in his flying to the Isle of Wight for autumn." However, in August of that year he did cross the sea to Ostend; and his journal of a tour through Belgium and up the Rhine into Switzerland gives jotted impressions of travel, marking his route and mainly recording his discomforts. He was knocked out of bed one morning at four o'clock to look at Mont

Blanc without the cloudy night-cap; "the glance I gave him did not by any means repay me for the trouble of travelling to see him," including, we may suppose, his disgust at the "infernally clatter of innumerable apes" in a Swiss hotel. Next year he was under hydropathic treatment in England, so much occupied with his poems that he suspended correspondence with friends and relations, wherefore the personal chronicle of this time is scantier than ever. He had been long meditating upon a social question that had been philosophically discussed since Rousseau's day, had been touched upon by Bentham and James Mill, but had never yet come within the sphere of practical English politics; and the outcome, in 1847, was his poem of *The Princess*.

Here is a romantic tale, with the Idea of a Female University for its theme and plot, and for its moral the sure triumph of the natural affections over any feminine attempt to ignore them, or to work out women's independence by a kind of revolt from the established intellectual dominion of man. The Princess repudiates a contract of marriage with a Prince to whom she has been betrothed in childhood, purposing to devote herself to the higher education of her own sex, in order that they may be mentally prepared to insist upon liberty and equality. But the Prince, with two comrades, puts on women's clothing; and they enter themselves as students in a college that admits women only within its bounds; they are speedily detected, as was obviously inevitable; and the contrabandists are scornfully expelled, as they fully deserved to be. The Prince's father declares war upon the father of the Princess to enforce the mar-

riage contract; but it is agreed to settle the quarrel by a combat of fifty picked warriors on either side; when the Prince is beaten down in the lists, and all the College is turned into a hospital for the wounded men, most of the girl graduates being judiciously ordered home. The Princess remains to nurse the defeated Prince and to read poetry by his bedside, with the natural consequence that in tending him she is drawn to love him, abandons her University, and marries her betrothed.

It is a beautiful serio-comic love-story, that has been treated over-seriously not only by those who dislike playing with a subject which is for them a matter of hard and earnest argument, but also by others to whom the poem is "the herald melody of the higher education of women." The logical conclusion from the *dénouement* is that matrimony is better for women than a life exclusively devoted to the superintendence of a sort of nunnery, in which girls are to be trained and fitted to cast off the yoke of men's pretentious superiority. Nor indeed was the college projected by the Princess as an alternative or antidote to marriage, but only in order that, if afterwards they chose to wed, they might do so on equal terms of intellectual companionship. A solid project of educational reform is surrounded with fantastic circumstances of romantic adventure, and is made the groundwork of some very fine poetry; while the substitution of women instead of men everywhere in the framework of college life and discipline gives ample room for artistic sketches of novel situations and costumes. The underlying social philosophy is, as usual, moderate and sensible: the supremacy of Love is temperately asserted; the

true value of the poem is rightly made to consist in its decorative beauty, in some delicate delineations of characters, in verse of sustained musical effect, and in a few exquisite lyrics that vary the unrhymed metre. The tender melancholy of a feeling that life may be passing without love, of vague regrets and longings, has never been more sympathetically expressed than in the song of Tears, idle Tears, with its refrain of the days that are no more, and the shadow of mortal darkness already falling over the season of youth:—

“ Ah, sad and strange as in dark summer dawns
The earliest pipe of half-awaken'd birds
To dying ears, when unto dying eyes
The casement slowly grows a glimmering square ;
So sad, so strange, the days that are no more.”

Few know, Tennyson said long afterwards to his son,¹ that this is a blank verse lyric; and perhaps there is no better example of a metrical arrangement of words into musical passages, divided into stanzas by the recurring cadence of each final line. Another song, *The Splendour falls on Castle Walls*, charms the ear, on the other hand, by harmonious assonance and dwelling on long-drawn rhymes. But *Home they brought their Warrior Dead*, in which (to quote Charles Kingsley) “the sight of the fallen hero's child opens the sluices of the widow's tears,” is the one piece that might have been written by an inferior songster, and it has earned popularity by touching a somewhat ordinary and facile note of pathos. It resembles too nearly an affecting anecdote. The amorous strain

¹ *Memoir.*

running through the whole poem indicates the under-current of natural passion which is sapping the whole edifice of female independence and self-reliance that the Princess has undertaken to build up on the basis of intellectual emancipation; while the hard lesson that all the refinements of cultured civilisation are powerless when confronted by the primitive appeal to force, is taught by the eventual dissolution of the University amid the clash of arms. It must be admitted that the Princess brought this catastrophe upon herself by the very drastic ordinance which decreed death to any man found within the walls of her college — a characteristic sample, though it may not have been so intended, of the quick resentment, the propensity toward short and sharp measures with offenders and enemies, that may be observed whenever women have risen to supreme rulership in troubled times. And the fact that all the illustrious types of feminine superiority cited by the Princess in her discourses, or by the Lady Ida in her professorial address — from the legendary Amazon down to Joan of Arc — are women renowned in war, might possibly be taken as the poet's subtle insinuation of female inconsistency. For the whole aim and educational policy of the College, if it was designed to promote equality between the sexes, should have been to denounce and depreciate the profession of arms, because that is the immovable cornerstone of masculine superiority.

The poem was materially altered and partly remodelled in the four editions that followed its first issue; and a line was inserted to show, as the *Memoir* tells us, that Tennyson "certainly did not mean to kill any one in the tournament"; though this casts a

shade of unreality over his description of a fierce encounter with sharp steel. Some passages in which the scornful invectives of the Princess border too nearly upon scolding,¹ are also judiciously struck out; and six of the songs were introduced in 1850. In regard to the metaphors and illustrative comparisons that abound throughout the narrative, we may notice how one point in a simile brings in a picture, after the Homeric fashion —

“ She read, till over brow
And cheek and bosom brake the wrathful bloom
As of some fire against a stormy cloud,
When the wild peasant rights himself, the rick
Flames, and his anger reddens in the heavens.”

Here we have a reminiscence of rick-burning to illustrate a hot cheek; and one can see that the poet's mind was continually seizing, retaining, and coining into words the impressions of sight and hearing, even if he had not told us of his method.

“ There was a period in my life (he wrote in a letter) when, as an artist, Turner, for instance, takes rough sketches of landscape, etc., in order to work them eventually into some great picture, so I was in the habit of chronicling, in four or five words or more, whatever might strike me as picturesque in Nature. I never put these down, and many and many a line has gone away on the north wind, but some remain.”²

He proceeds to give specimens; and he further remarks, most truly, that he might easily have borrowed from

¹ “ Go help the half-brained dwarf, Society,
To find low motives unto noble deeds.

* * * * *

“ Go, fitter far for narrower neighbourhoods,
Old talker, haunt where gossip breeds and seethes.”

² *Memoir.*

the energetic language of the people expressions and images which the critics would have credited to the effort of original creative fancy, but would have condemned as unreal and non-natural. For the vernacular speech takes its lights and shades directly from things visible;¹ and in its metaphors one can detect a survival of the primitive animism, as in Tennyson's instance of an old fishwife, who had lost two sons at sea, crying to the advancing tide —

“Ay, roar, do, how I hates to see thee show thy white teeth.”²

When the popular superstition becomes a literary device, it is quite possible to abuse the poetic license that invests senseless things with a kind of human passion, as in Kingsley's verse of “the cruel crawling foam.” But Tennyson never overcharged his metaphors in this way; and it is certain that in language what is true, what has been actually said, is often quite as strong as what has been imagined, and that no more powerful words can be deliberately invented than those which can be suddenly wrung out of a man by mortal danger or some violent emotion.

During the years 1846–50 Tennyson lived mostly at Cheltenham, making excursions to Cornwall and to Scotland, where he traversed the classic ground of Burns's poetry. It may be worth while to quote here a passage from the “Euphranor” of E. FitzGerald, where, in mentioning Tennyson's emotion on seeing “the banks and braes of bonnie Doon,” he is led on to some striking and very sympathetic recollections of his friend.

¹ *E.g.* —

“He shall never darken my door.”

² *Memoir.*

“ . . . The only living, and like to live, Poet I had known, when, so many years after, he found himself beside that ‘bonnie Doon,’ and — whether it were from recollection of poor Burns, or of ‘the days that are no more’ which haunt us all, I know not — I think he did not know — but, he somehow ‘broke,’ as he told me, ‘broke into a passion of tears.’ Of tears, which during a long and pretty intimate intercourse, I had never seen glisten in his eye but once, when reading Virgil — ‘dear old Virgil,’ as he called him — together: and then of the burning of Troy in the second *Æneid* — whether moved by the catastrophe’s self, or the majesty of the verse it is told in — or, as before, scarce knowing why. For, as King Arthur shall bear witness, no young Edwin he, though, as a great Poet, comprehending all the softer stops of human Emotion in that Register where the Intellectual, no less than what is called the Poetical, faculty predominated. As all who knew him know, a Man at all points, Euphranor — like young Digby, of grand proportion and feature, significant of that inward Chivalry, becoming his ancient and honourable race; when himself a ‘Yongé Squire,’ like him in Chaucer, ‘of grete strength,’ that could hurl the crowbar further than any of the neighbouring clowns, whose humours, as well as of their betters — Knight, Squire, Landlord, and Land-tenant — he took quiet note of, like Chaucer himself.”

Another journey was to Ireland, where the echoes of Killarney inspired the bugle song in *The Princess*. The *Memoir* tells us that he saw much of Thackeray and Carlyle, among other notables. He loved Catullus as a poet whose form and feeling, the sweetness of his verse and his enjoyment of reposeful rusticity, attest an affinity between two cultured civilisations that are separated by a long interval of time, though the contrast of morals is often wide enough. It was not in Thackeray’s town-bred nature to rate the Roman high; yet we find him writing a handsome apology for having said in his haste, when Tennyson quoted to

him Catullus, that he could do better himself. Carlyle "had opened the gates of his Valhalla to let Alfred in," and evidently enjoyed high discourse with him. Between two such men there were necessarily frequent argumentative collisions, their minds were predisposed by training and temperament to divergent views, and their intellectual perspective was by no means the same. Carlyle saw the follies and iniquities of the world through a lurid magnifying glass; he prophesied ruin like an ancient seer, and called down the wrath of God upon knaves and idiots; while Tennyson's inclination was towards indulgence of human frailty, and hope in the slow betterment of the world. Violence in word or deed was to him antipathetic; and one may guess that he preferred to study heroes in their quieter moods, in some such fits of musing as those which Shakespeare interjects among scenes of furious action. He might have given us Cromwell reflecting in a soliloquy upon the burden of solitary rulership, surrounded by fanatics and conspirators. An extract from his conversations with Mrs. Rundle Charles indicates one point of what Tennyson thought about Carlyle, "You would like him for one day, but get tired of him, so vehement and destructive"; the fastidious poet must have found in him too much sound and fury, and may possibly have doubted whether it signified anything. FitzGerald says in one of his letters (1846) —

"I met Carlyle last night at Tennyson's, and they two discussed the merits of this world and the next, till I wished myself out of *this*, at any rate. Carlyle gets more wild, savage, and unreasonable every day, and I do believe will turn mad."

Tennyson preferred the *Odyssey* to the *Iliad*:

Carlyle, who liked fierce heroes, and had no objection as a historian to stern cruelty, though a little personal discomfort was intolerable to him, would probably have taken the other side; but on the subject of tobacco they were at any rate of one mind, and on all questions they disputed with amicable vigour. Later on Carlyle, at some moment when he was more than usually sour and crusty, described the poet as sitting on a dunghill amid innumerable dead dogs; meaning, as one may guess, no more than impatience with a man of rare intellect who seemed to him to sit dreaming on the shores of old romance while the State of England was rotten with shams and mouldy with whited sepulchres. But Carlyle afterwards confessed that "his own description was not luminous"; and though he cared little for verse, yet he could quote *Tears, idle Tears*, felt the spirit of the ballad of *The Revenge*, was quite upset when *The Grandmother* was read to him, and said towards his life's end that Alfred always from the beginning took the right side of every question.¹ About the same time FitzGerald writes of Tennyson: "He is the same magnanimous, kindly, delightful fellow as ever; uttering by far the finest prose sayings of any one."

It will be recollected that Arthur Hallam died at Vienna in 1833. Some of the sections of Tennyson's monumental elegy upon his friend were written very soon afterwards; and their number had rapidly increased by 1841, when Edmund Lushington first saw the collection and heard the poet recite some of them. It must have been not far from completion in 1845, since in that year Lushington was shown the

¹ *Memoir.*

stanzas upon his marriage with Tennyson's younger sister Cecilia, with which the poem is now concluded. Eight editions, all of them containing successive additions and alterations, followed the first publication of *In Memoriam* in 1850, which may accordingly be taken as the outcome of seventeen years' meditative composition. Of all Tennyson's continuous poems it is the longest and the most elaborate; it affected profoundly the minds of the generation among whom it appeared; it embodies the writer's philosophy upon the ever-present subject of life and death, upon all the problems suggested by the mutability of the world's face and forms, and on the questions whether human mortality may not fall within the scope of the universal natural law, whether faith in things spiritual is a true intuition, or no more than a hopeful conjecture, than a painting of

"the shadows that are beneath
The wide winding caves of the peopled tomb."¹

The poet, like Bunyan's pilgrim, forces his way through the slough of despond, passes the caverns of Doubt and Despair, and emerges finally into resignation, with trust in the Unseen Power that is guiding all creation to some far-off divine event. In this noble poem — on the whole Tennyson's masterpiece — all natural things that catch his eye or ear remind him, by contrast or sympathy, of his bereavement, and interpret his personal emotion. Many of us know how the whole world seems changed and discoloured by some calamitous shock; and here the vivid sensibility of the poet reflects and illustrates this state of mind by figures, emblems, and solemn meditations.

¹ Shelley.

He is impelled by his own passionate grief to dwell upon the contrast between irremediable human suffering and the calm aspect of inanimate Nature, between the short and sorrowful days of man and the long procession of ages. From the misgivings and perplexities, the tendency to lose heart, engendered by a sense of being environed by forces that are blind and relentless, he finds his ultimate escape in the conviction that God and Nature cannot be at strife, that friends will meet and know each other again hereafter, and that somehow good will be the final goal of ill. His sure and never-failing mastery of poetic diction, gained by practice and severe discipline, carries him through this long monotone with a high and even flight; the four lines are fitted into each stanza without flaws, in singular harmony; the sections are complete in writing, measure, and balance.

No chapter in the *Memoir* contains matter of higher biographical interest than that which is headed "In Memoriam." A letter from the late Henry Sidgwick, whose clear and intrepid spirit never flinched before intellectual doubts or vague forebodings, describes the impression produced on him and on others of his time by this poem, showing how it struck in, so to speak, upon their religious debates at a moment of conflicting tendencies and great uncertainty of direction, giving intensity of expression to the dominant feeling and wider range to the prevailing thought.

"The most important influence of 'In Memoriam' on my thought, apart from its poetic charm as an expression of personal emotion, opened in a region, if I may so say, deeper down than the difference between Theism and Christianity :

it lay in the unparalleled combination of intensity of feeling with comprehensiveness of view and balance of judgment, shown in presenting the *deepest* needs and perplexities of humanity. And this influence, I find, has increased rather than diminished as years have gone on, and as the great issues between Agnostic Science and Faith have become continually more prominent. In the sixties I should say that these deeper issues were somewhat obscured by the discussions on Christian dogma, and Inspiration of Scripture, etc. . . . During these years we were absorbed in struggling for freedom of thought in the trammels of a historical religion ; and perhaps what we sympathized with most in 'In Memoriam' at this time, apart from the personal feeling, was the defence of 'honest doubt,' the reconciliation of knowledge and faith in the introductory poem, and the hopeful trumpet-ring of the lines on the New Year. . . . Well, the years pass, the struggle with what Carlyle used to call 'Hebrew old clothes' is over, Freedom is won, and what does Freedom bring us to? It brings us face to face with atheistic science ; the faith in God and Immortality, which we had been struggling to clear from superstition, suddenly seems to be *in the air* ; and in seeking for a firm basis for this faith we find ourselves in the midst of the 'fight with death' which 'In Memoriam' so powerfully presents."

The whole letter, which is too long for quotation here, may be read in the *Memoir* as a fair representation of the effect produced by In Memoriam upon men of sincere and sensitive minds, who resolutely confronted the inexorable facts of human existence, yet were not content to treat the problems as insoluble. And so the wide impression that was made by these exquisitely musical meditations may be ascribed to their sympathetic affinity with the peculiar spiritual aspirations and intellectual dilemmas of the time. Dogmatic theology, notwithstanding the famous rallying movement at Oxford, had long been losing ground ; liturgies and positive articles of

religion were out of credit; the proofs of Christianity by rational evidence brought religion upon the unfavourable ground of appeal to history and to questions of fact. Among average Englishmen a large number were willing to take morality as the chief test of religious truth, were disposed to hold that its essential principles were best stated in the language of ethics. The Utilitarian philosophers undertook to provide ethics with an experimental basis; and the researches of physical science threw doubt upon the actuality of divine intervention in the course, or even the constitution, of the world; they pointed to a system that was mechanical, though not necessarily materialistic. Then came, with a reaction, the energetic protests of those who saw and felt that Religion, which is to the vast majority of mankind a spiritual necessity, must not stand or fall by documentary evidence, must be placed in some region that is inaccessible to arguments from mere utility, that is independent of and untouched by the observation of phenomena or the computation of probabilities. Some endeavoured to show that the conclusions of Science could be reconciled with the orthodox traditions; others, as Newman, declared that there was no conflict at all, that theology is the highest science, entirely above and unaffected by what used to be called natural philosophy; but Tennyson saw that a serious conflict, a revolution of ideas, was inevitable. All speculation, physical or metaphysical, is necessarily affected by what we know of the world we live in; and the unrolling of the record of an immeasurable past compels us to look with new feelings on all that goes on around us. If we compare Tennyson with Wordsworth, we are at once aware

of a marked difference in their treatment of Nature. Wordsworth dwells mainly upon her calm, majestic, and kindly aspect; she is the homely nurse who endeavours to content the immortal soul of imperial man with his humble abode on earth; she is beautiful and beneficent; she "lifts the spirit to a calmer height"; and although Wordsworth may be occasionally touched by her insensibility to human sorrow, may be perplexed by finding her ways unintelligible, yet he discerns everywhere the interfusion of a divine spirit, the evidences of admirable arrangement and design. For Tennyson also the external world was sublime and beautiful, soothing his regrets and suggesting resignation to the common lot; but the illimitable expansion of time and space laid open by scientific discoveries, the record of waste and prodigality through countless ages, the disclosure of the processes of Nature, her impassive uniformity, her implacable regularity, took strong hold of an imaginative mind that was in communion with the thought and knowledge of the day. After Tennyson's death Huxley wrote that he was the only modern poet, perhaps the only poet since Lucretius, who had taken the trouble to understand the work and methods of men of science; though one may remark that the two poets found their consolation in very different conclusions. It now seemed to him that the scientific men were laying claims to a dominion which might place in jeopardy not merely the formal outworks but the central dogma of Christianity, which is a belief in a future life, in the soul's conscious immortality. Is man subject to the general law of unending mutability, and is he after all but

the highest and latest type, to be made and broken like a million others, mere clay in the moulding hands that are darkly seen in the evolution of worlds? The poet transfigured these obstinate questionings into the vision of

“an ever-breaking shore
That tumbled in the Godless deep.”

He asks: Shall man

“Who loved, who suffer'd countless ills,
Who battled for the True, the Just,
Be blown about the desert dust,
Or seal'd within the iron hills?”

and he was haunted by the misgiving that man also might be no more than other atoms in the ever-changing universe, that prayer is fruitless, that death may be stronger than love, and that Nature gives no intimations of conscious survival. Nevertheless her face, as he sees it, is so fair that it brings him consolation. The alternations of the seasons, the storm and the sunshine, are reflected in his varying moods; the spring breezes carry a cheerful message, the autumnal gales accord with the unrest of his mind; a quiet sea turns his thoughts to the calm of death. He feels the immemorial touch of sadness in the brief lifetime of flower and foliage, in the passing of the long light summer days; yet beyond all these transitory images he looks forward to the twilight of eternal day on the low, dark verge of human existence, where the mysteries of pain and sorrow will be understood, and no more shadows will fall on the landscape of the past. After long striving with doubts and fears, after having

“fought with death,” he resolves that we cannot be
 “wholly brain, magnetic mockeries” —

‘ Not only cunning casts in clay :
 Let Science prove we are, and then
 What matters Science unto men,
 At least to me ? I would not stay.’”

After this manner Tennyson made his stand against the encroachments of Science upon the spiritual domain; though he refused to retreat, like some others, behind dogmatic entrenchments, and trod under foot the terrors of Acheron. By tight-lacing creeds, to use Carlyle’s phrase, he would not be bound; he believed firmly in some indissoluble relation between human destinies and a divine providence; he reckoned the strenuous instinct and universal anticipation of some future life to be presumptive evidence of a truth; and he was confident that friends would meet and know each other hereafter. A poem which is a long epitaph must naturally touch in this consolatory strain upon the visitations of sorrow and death; but it must also remind us of the limitations, the inconclusiveness, that are inseparable from the emotional treatment of enigmas that foil the deepest philosophies. And since not every one can be satisfied with subjective faith or lofty intuitions, it may be that the note of alarm and despondency sounded by *In Memoriam* startled more minds than were reassured by the poet’s final conviction that all is well

“ tho’ faith and form
 Be sunder’d in the night of fear.”

If, therefore, the poem strengthened in many the determination to go onward trustfully, on the other hand there was an attitude of terror in the recoil from

materialistic paths that lead to an abyss; and perhaps it may be so far counted among the influences which have combined to promote a retreat in the latter half of the nineteenth century toward the shelter of dogmatic beliefs and an infallible authority in matters of religion. But whatever may have been the intellectual influences of *In Memoriam*, we may agree that it enlarged the range of poetry by entering sympathetically upon the field of these fresh doubts and difficulties, and by showing how a mind that in grief turns naturally to religion may become absorbed in intellectual problems. Wordsworth found content in the contemplation of Nature; Science he despised, and such questions as whether God and Nature are at strife did not trouble his serene philosophy. Tennyson's meditations were turned toward the enigmas of life by the stroke of grief; and he was thus led, rightly, to fulfil the poet's mission, which is to embody the floating thought of his period. In those very popular lines

"There lives more faith in honest doubt,
Believe me, than in half the creeds,"

we have an antithesis, a kind of paradox, that concisely represents the prevailing state of many minds to whom scientific explorations brought increasing religious perplexity, until they obtained repose in the conclusion that essential truths lie somewhere beyond and are independent of all positive doctrines and formulas. "Our little systems have their day"; we may believe where we cannot verify, and Knowledge must have her place as the younger child of Wisdom. The poet leads us to a cloudy height; and though it is not his business

to satisfy the strict philosophical enquirer, he offers to all wandering souls a refuge in the faith

“that comes of self-control,
The truths that never can be proved
Until we close with all we loved
And all we flow from, soul in soul.”

We know from the *Memoir* that Tennyson believed himself to be the originator of the metre of In Memoriam, until after its appearance he was told that it might be found in Elizabethan poetry and elsewhere.¹ Of the two specimens in Ben Jonson, one of them, the elegy Underwood, has a certain resemblance in movement and tone with Tennyson's shorter pieces in the same metre, probably because in this form the stanza carries naturally a certain dignity and sobriety of feeling, and is well suited by its measured regularity for compact and sententious expression. The interposition of a couplet with a rhyme of its own between the first and fourth line, stays the pace of the verse. Yet the high pathetic vibrations of feeling in the finest passages of In Memoriam prove that in Tennyson's hands the instrument had acquired a wider range; while the main current of his meditations passes through so many varieties of impressions or aspects of nature, the dim rainy morning, the short midsummer night, the bitter wintry day, with moods corresponding to these influences, that few will agree with FitzGerald's objection to the poem as monotonous.

In a little volume published in 1866 under the title of *Tennysonia*, the writer, who is an ardent admirer of

¹ A complete list of the writers who had used the metre is given in the commentary on "In Memoriam" by Professor A. C. Bradley (1901).

the poet, has been at the pains of pointing out, by parallel quotations, certain coincidences of thought and phrase between In Memoriam and Shakespeare's sonnets. Something of the kind is here and there faintly traceable, and the "ruined woodlands" in Maud might remind us of Shakespeare's likening the leafless trees to "bare ruined choirs, where once the sweet birds sang." But in Shakespeare himself, as in all other poets, similar reminiscences of this kind may be discovered, nor could they ever be rightly made an imputation against any great writer. FitzGerald gives the sound ruling on this subject in one of his letters — "I never speak of Plagiarism unless the Coincidence, or Adoption, be something quite superior to the general Material of him in whom the 'parallel passage' is found. And Shakespeare may have read the other old boy [Tusser] and remembered unconsciously, or never have read, and never remembered." The comparison in *Tennysonia* proves at most, and apparently aims at no more than proving, an inference that Tennyson's memory had assimilated the sonnets. And it is only of real interest when it shows occasionally how the ideas and impressions, which are as much the common property of all ages as the natural phenomena and human sensitiveness that produce them, are set in new frames by the chief artists of each succeeding time; how, to quote Tennyson, the thoughts of man are widened by the circling of the suns. The incessant battle between sea and shore reminds Shakespeare that the solid earth, and all that it contains, are shifting and transitory; while Tennyson's reflection upon the changes of land and water takes the vast scale of geologic periods —

“ There rolls the deep where grew the tree.
 O earth, what changes hast thou seen !
 There where the long street roars, hath been
 The stillness of the central sea.”

The sonnets and *In Memoriam* have both for their subject the passionate attachment to a friend, living or dead ; and each poet turns frequently to Nature for an image of his emotion or a response to it. It may be noticed, as a point of style, that whereas Shakespeare strikes off his image and fits it to his thought, in two or four lines,¹ the modern artist draws out a whole landscape, or accumulates picturesque touches —

“ I find no place that does not breathe
 Some gracious memory of my friend ;

“ No gray old grange, or lonely fold,
 Or low morass and whispering reed,
 Or simple stile from mead to mead,
 Or sheepwalk up the windy wold ” —

prolonging the description through several stanzas. Both poets are profoundly impressed by Nature’s warning to man that all her works are perishable ; but while Tennyson is alarmed by the sense of mortality, yet finds hope in some future state beyond, Shakespeare, with his “ indolent and kingly gaze ” at human fears and follies, propounds no reassuring speculation. Hamlet’s last words are that the rest is silence.

In 1836, when Charles Tennyson married Louisa Sellwood, her sister Emily had been one of the bridesmaids. To her Alfred Tennyson became soon afterwards engaged ; but in 1840 the prospect of

¹ “ Like as the waves make toward the pebbled shore,
 So do our minutes hasten to their end.”

marriage appeared so remote that correspondence between them was broken off, and ten years passed before the engagement was renewed. The wedding took place at last in June 1850, at Shiplake Church on the Thames, when the two became partners upon a very slender capital, including the expectation of a royalty on the published poems. They made a journey into western England, visiting Glastonbury and Arthur Hallam's grave at Clevedon. A very generous offer from Mr. Monckton Milnes of permanent quarters in a wing of his house at Fryston they would not accept; they took a house at Warninglid in Sussex, but the first storm blew a hole through the wall, and they departed hastily, to find at last a fixed habitation at Chapel House, Twickenham. Their first child was born, but died at birth, in April 1851, after which they travelled into Italy, meeting the Brownings at Paris as they returned homeward. Under the title of "The Daisy," Tennyson has commemorated this journey in stanzas of consummate metrical harmony, with their beautiful anapæstic ripple in each final line, to be studied by all who would understand the quantitative value (not merely accentual) of English syllables in rhythmic compositions —

“But ere we reach'd the highest summit
I pluck'd a daisy, I gave it you.

“It told of England then to me,
And now it tells of Italy.
O love, we two shall go no longer
To lands of summer across the sea.”

Tennyson had at this time become the foremost poet of his day. His genius had been saluted by the

applause and admiration of his contemporaries, and was now under the glow of its meridian. In a contribution to the *Life of William Morris*,¹ Canon Dixon, writing of Oxford in 1851-53, says:—

“It is difficult to the present generation to understand the Tennysonian enthusiasm which then prevailed both in Oxford and in the world. All reading men were Tennysonians; all sets of reading men talked poetry. Poetry was the thing; and it was felt with justice that this was due to Tennyson. He had invented a new poetry, a new poetic English; his use of words was new, and every piece that he wrote was a conquest of a new region. This lasted till Maud, in 1855, which was his last poem that mattered.”

This quotation, though one may demur to the final words, shows Tennyson's position and the attraction of his poetry for the younger men; and his general eminence had already been marked for public recognition. In November 1850, after Wordsworth's death, the Laureateship was offered to Tennyson. Lord John Russell submitted to the Queen the four names of Leigh Hunt, Sheridan Knowles, Henry Taylor, and, last on the list, Tennyson. The Prince Consort's admiration of *In Memoriam* determined Her Majesty's choice, which might seem easy enough to the verdict of the present day. The subjoined extract from the Queen's Secretary is worth quoting, to show that the Laureate's duties were not intended to be burdensome, and that the offer was made, as the letter ended by saying, as a mark of Her Majesty's appreciation of literary distinction—

“The ancient duties of this Office, which consisted in laudatory Odes to the Sovereign, have been long, as you are probably aware, in abeyance, and have never been called for

¹By J. W. Mackail (1899).

during the Reign of Her present Majesty. The Queen however has been anxious that the Office should be maintained; first on account of its antiquity, and secondly because it establishes a connection, through Her Household, between Her Majesty and the poets of this country as a body.”¹

To refuse Wordsworth’s succession, proposed to him on such honourable terms, would have been difficult; nevertheless Tennyson hesitated until his acceptance was determined by the right judgment of his friends. His accession to office brought down upon him, among other honoraria, “such shoals of poems that I am almost crazed with them; the two hundred million poets of Great Britain deluge me daily. Truly, the Laureateship is no sinecure.”² For the inevitable levée he was accommodated, not without disquietude over the nether garment, with the loan of a Court suit from his ancient brother in song, Samuel Rogers, who had declined the laurels on the plea of age.

In 1852 the Duke of Wellington’s death was the theme of the first verses published by the Laureate in discharge of his functions. It is remarkable, and to some it may be a consoling example of the necessary superficiality of day-by-day criticism, that we find Tennyson, in a letter thanking Henry Taylor for a just and discerning eulogium, writing that he is doubly grateful for it in the all but universal depreciation of his poem by the Press. Yet it is probably the best poem on a national event that has ever been struck off by a Laureate under the sudden impatient spur of the moment; remembering that for a poet of established reputation this kind of improvisation is a serious ordeal. Southey could only deplore George the Third’s death

¹ *Memoir.*

² *Ibid.*

in hexameters that were incontestably deplorable; and Wordsworth, as Laureate, attempted nothing of the sort. From this point of view Tennyson's success in the Wellington Ode, which is well sustained at a high level of solemn harmony, may be reckoned unique; though the original version, which must have been rapidly composed, was amended and strengthened in three subsequent editions. The intermediate changes were not invariably for the better. Of the two lines —

“ Where shall we lay the man whom we deplore?
He died on Walmer's lonely shore ” —

the second line, which is perhaps the weakest that Tennyson ever published, was inserted in 1853, and most deservedly ejected in the following year. In the couplet —

“ Mourn, for to us he seems the last,
Remembering all his greatness in the past,”

one misses with regret the original second line —

“ Our sorrow draws but on the golden past,”

which is stronger in sound and feeling, and must have been changed for the prosaic reason that sorrow for the dead can never draw on the present. The keynote of heroic character is finely given in the lines —

“ Not once or twice in our rough island-story
The path of duty was the way to glory.”

They are repeated as the burden or lofty moral of the poem, and have taken rank among the quotations from English poetry that are familiar in our mouths as household words.

The true successors of the earlier bards, who celebrated in *chansons de geste* and in ballads the deeds and death of great men or some famous national exploit, have been, in quite modern times, poets who, like Campbell, Cowper, and the author of *The Burial of Sir John Moore*, spontaneously and unofficially, by some happy stroke of genius, seized upon some stirring incident of the time, and struck powerfully the right popular note. That this has now become generally assumed to be the vocation of the ideal Laureate, rather than the production of courtly verse, may be fairly attributed in a large degree to Tennyson, who evidently so understood his office, for he began thenceforward to write poems upon heroic exploits, or the incidents of national war. In this spirit he composed *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, a fine rolling war-chant, with a thunderous echo in the dominant rhyme, which gained hearty applause from the British soldiers in the Crimea, particularly for the well-known line — “Some one had blundered” — that was omitted in the revised version of 1855. In *The Defence of Lucknow*, an incident that is famous in the annals of the Indian Mutiny, there are passages full of vigour and animation, but on the whole too much vehemence and tumultuous activity; the poet endeavours to startle and strike the imagination by glowing pictures of the realities of a siege; he accumulates authentic details, he tries to give us the scenes and events with the roar of battle, the terror and the misery, the furious assaults and the desperate defence, as on the stage of a theatre: —

“Then on another wild morning another wild earthquake out-
tore

Clean from our lines of defence ten or twelve good paces
or more.

Rifeman, high on the roof, hidden there from the light of
the sun —

One has leapt up on the breach, crying out : ‘Follow me,
follow me !’ —

Mark him — he falls ! then another, and *him* too, and down
goes he.

Had they been bold enough then, who can tell but the
traitors had won ?

Boardings and rafters and doors — an embrasure ! make way
for the gun !

Now double-charge it with grape ! It is charged and we
fire, and they run.”

Here is abundance of fiery animation, but also too many descriptive particulars ; and as the whole poem is composed in this manner, it resembles a vivid narration of events in pictorial prose. Such work hardly lies within the compass of the poetic artist, whose business it is to simplify and concentrate the general impression ; and though the Defence of Lucknow is full of energy and ardour, one must pass upon it the criticism that the canvas is overcrowded and the verse too hurried and vehement for the ballad, or for the lyric of heroism, which is best when it gives a single tragic situation in clear outline.

In the poetry of action Tennyson made his highest score by ‘The Revenge: A Ballad of the Fleet ; although even this spirited poem, with its note of stately and unconquerable valour, hardly attains the impressive simplicity of the true ballad ; it is still too circumstantial. We have here a splendidly versified narrative of a sea-fight, with all the atmosphere of the winds and the waves : it is a noble *chanson de*

geste, and the poem ends with the closing of the waters over the ship: —

“ When a wind from the lands they had ruin’d awoke from sleep,
 And the water began to heave and the weather to moan,
 And or ever that evening ended a great gale blew,
 And a wave like the wave that is raised by an earthquake grew,
 Till it smote on their hulls and their sails and their masts and their flags,
 And the whole sea plunged and fell on the shot-shatter’d navy of Spain,
 And the little *Revenge* herself went down by the island crags
 To be lost evermore in the main.”

The distance of time lends its enchantment to this story, and three centuries gave Tennyson the right prospective; he could throw into strong relief the situation with its central figure, he could omit particulars because they were unknown; he followed perforce the natural instinct of popular tradition which preserves the broad lines of heroic character and achievement, leaving the rest to oblivion. Nothing is more rare in modern poetry than success in heroic verse — in the art of rendering with strength, beauty, and dignity the acts and emotions of men at moments which string up their energies to the highest pitch, and bring into full play the qualities of inflexible courage and endurance. To write of battles long ago is always hard enough, but in such cases romantic colouring is admissible, and the lapse of many years has luckily rubbed out all but the salient features of a great event or a daring exploit. When these subjects belong to contemporary history, to the modern bard’s

own lifetime, the task becomes far more difficult, and has foiled poets of very high reputation, as in the case of Walter Scott, who has given us a magnificent battle piece of Flodden, but two very inferior poems upon Waterloo. You cannot be romantic over a contemporary battle or siege that has just been fully described in the newspapers, for the public knows exactly what happened; while if you attempt to be severely realistic you are lost among unmanageable details; and you find yourself emphatically versifying what has already been said with the effective actuality of prose.

CHAPTER IV

MAUD; IDYLLS OF THE KING; ENOCH ARDEN

IN August 1852 a son (the present Lord Tennyson) had been born in their house at Twickenham; and in the next year they had at last found a permanent abiding place. For in 1853 Tennyson, having by this time an income of £500 a year from his poems, bought Farringford in the Isle of Wight, his favourite habitation ever afterwards, within sight of the sea, and within sound of its waves in a storm; with the lawns, spreading trees, and meadows running up to the skirts of windy downs, that have been frequently sketched in his poetry, and will long be identified with his presence. There he worked, morning and evening, at "Maud," sitting in his high-backed wooden chair in a little room at the top of the house, and smoking the sacred pipes during certain half-hours of strict seclusion when his best thoughts came to him.¹

In 1837 a collection of verses had been published under the title of *The Tribute*, signifying that they were contributed by various writers of repute at that time, in order that the profits of a subscription list to the volume might be offered to a man of letters who had fallen into poverty. Monckton Milnes wrote round for subscriptions to all his friends, among others to Alfred Tennyson, who sent a humorous refusal,

¹ *Memoir*.

averring that he had sworn never to assist in such enterprises. Monckton Milnes did not appreciate the bantering tone of the letter, was angered by the refusal, and wrote a sour answer, whereupon Tennyson turned away his wrath with good-natured expostulation, and sent his contribution. It is a short poem of passionate lamentation for a woman who has been loved and is lost; and it not only contains the theme upon which Maud was long afterwards worked out dramatically, but the stanzas reappear, with slight changes and considerable omissions, in the twenty-fourth section of the later poem; nor did Tennyson ever rise higher in the elegiac strain than in some of the best of them:—

“O that ’twere possible
 After long grief and pain
 To find the arms of my true love
 Round me once again !

* * * * *

“Alas for her that met me,
 That heard me softly call,
 Came glimmering thro’ the laurels
 At the quiet evenfall,
 In the garden by the turrets
 Of the old manorial hall.”¹

The fifth edition of *In Memoriam* had been published in 1852. It was followed in 1855 by the first appearance of *Maud*, which Lowell rather affectedly calls the antiphonal voice of the earlier poem. The change of subject, tone, and manner was certainly striking; and

¹ As *The Tribute* is now a very rare book, it is worth mentioning that this poem, in its original form, may be found at the end of vol. lxxix. of the *Annual Register* (1837). The sub-editor of the time was rebuked by his chief for having inserted among his selections from the year’s poetry a bit of trivial verse.

the public seem to have been taken by surprise. The transition was from irremediable sorrow to irresistible passion; from philosophic meditation to a romantic love story with a tragic ending; from stanzas swaying slowly like a dirge within their uniform compass, to an abundant variety of metrical movement, according with the changes of scene and attuned to the development of the plot through ardent courtship to the lover's triumph, to detection, a duel, the frenzy of remorse, and the final chant of liberation from all these miserable memories, when "the old hysterical mock disease" is forgotten and overpowered in the tumultuous agitation of a great national war. The general reader was unfavourably prepossessed by the tone of restless despondency that runs through the opening stanzas, and by the intimations of a morbid temperament, of a sickly cast of thought, which are given as the premonitory symptoms of a mind unfitted to withstand the shock of a sudden catastrophe. The light literary reviewer was disposed to be satirical upon a hero whose attitude was not heroic; the higher criticism was divided. The poet was, in fact, contending against a difficulty that is inseparable from the form of a metrical romance in which a single personage tells his own story; for while a skilful novelist would easily have sketched such a character, or a playwright might have brought it out by action and dialogue, yet when a man is set up to confess his own intense sensibility, to describe his own misery and madness, the part becomes much harder to manage, and the audience is apt to become impatient with him. Nevertheless Henry Taylor, Ruskin, Jowett, and the Brownings spoke without hesitation of the

poem's great merits. Tyndall bought the volume on his way to a theatre one evening; he read it between the acts of the performance, continued it outside in the street, and had reached the end before he got home. He admired it extremely, and Lord Houghton, who agreed with him, exclaimed that the reviewers were blundering.¹ Jowett wrote:—

“No poem since Shakespeare seems to show equal power of the same kind, or equal knowledge of human nature. No modern poem contains more lines that ring in the ears of men. I do not know any verse out of Shakespeare in which the ecstasy of love soars to such a height.”

This is certainly no faint praise; and although the general verdict would be that it is excessive, we have at any rate the first impression made by the poem's emotional force upon a very critical intellect.

“The peculiarity of *Maud*,” Tennyson said, “is that different phases of passion in one person take the place of different characters”; and the effect of his own recitation was to set this conception in clear relief, by showing the connection and significance of the linked monodies, combined with the vivid musical rendering of a pathetic love story. The first spark of love kindles rapidly into heat, and the emotion rises by degrees of intensity to the rapture of meeting *Maud* in the garden, falling again suddenly to the depths of bitter despair; until the luckless youth again recovers heart and strength in the stir and rumour of national war, and determines, as many have done before him, to stiffen his nerves by a course of energetic activity, and to try the bracing tonic of real danger.

The poem in its development strikes all the lyrical

¹ *Memoir*.

chords, although it cannot be said that all of them are touched with equal skill. Probably the sustained and perfect execution of such a varied composition would be too arduous a task for any artist, since it is no easy matter to substitute, dramatically, different phases of passion in one person for different characters. Some considerable mental agility is needed to fall in with the rapid changes of mood and motive which succeed each other within the compass of a piece that is too short for the delineation of character: ranging from melodramatic horror in the opening stanzas to passionate and joyous melodies in the middle part, sinking into a dolorous wail, rising into frenzy, and closing with the trumpet note of war.

The Monodrama has in fact its peculiar difficulties of execution: the speaker has to introduce himself, and to explain the situation in a kind of indirect narrative that must be kept up to the lyrical pitch by effort and emphasis. The strain of this necessity is especially visible at the beginning of *Maud*, because the story opens with the familiar incident of financial disaster, and ordinary matters of fact have to be draped in the garb of poetry. The father of the soliloquist has been ruined by the failure of a great speculation, which is understood to have enriched *Maud's* father; and the son naturally denounces lying financiers and mercantile greed in general, contrasting the ill-gotten luxury of a society which must cheat or be cheated with the hideous misery and crime of the poor. If these be the cankers of a calm world, the blessings of Peace; if pickpockets, burglars, and swindlers are to flourish, he infinitely prefers "the heart of the citizen hissing in war on his own hearth-

stone," the ardour of battle, the supreme struggle that turns every man into a patriot and a soldier. Clearly the poet is here compelled by the story's need of elevation, at this part of it, to paint in sombre or startling colours, to rhapsodise somewhat beyond reason, to overflow with scornful invective, and to allow a solitary youth to justify his disgust of life by railing at the degradation and rottenness of the world around him. It is Locksley Hall with the cry of revolt against modern society pitched an octave higher; and in the first and fourth sections there is so much in this vein that the melodramatic impression is not easily shaken off. Englishmen at large hesitate over thunderous denunciations, in verse, of social wrongs; and the sorrows or disappointments of the money market are good matter for the prose writer, but hardly for the poet, who cannot be expected to give the economist or the politician fair play. Questions of this kind belong to the frigid utilitarian order, and it is dangerous to handle them enthusiastically.

But the vision of Maud, his playmate in childhood, scatters all these distempered complainings; and the young man becomes absorbed in the love of a beautiful girl. The wooing and the winning of her, the rapid growth of a mutual passion, the stolen meetings, the plighting of troth, the ecstasy of his adoration, the waiting for her in the garden after a ball, are told in a series of exquisite lyrics, of which it may be said that the English language contains none better than the very best of them. The subtle influences of sight and sound, of dawn and twilight,

" the voice of the long sea wave as it swelled
Now and then in the dim gray dawn,"

the call of the birds in the high Hall garden, the spreading cedar, the glance of an evening sun over the dark moorland, the chilly white mist falling like a shroud, mingle with and heighten the romance of their secret love passages, and bring shadowy presentiments of danger. The stars shine brighter as he looks at them and thinks of his sleeping lady:—

“But now by this my love has closed her sight
 And given false death her hand, and stol'n away
 To dreamful wastes where footless fancies dwell
 Among the fragments of the golden day.
 * * * * *
 And ye meanwhile far over moor and fell
 Beat to the noiseless music of the night!
 Has our whole earth gone nearer to the glow
 Of your soft splendours that you look so bright?
 Beat, happy stars, timing with things below,
 Beat with my heart more blest than heart can tell,
 Blest, but for some dark undercurrent woe.”

Yet the poet is still hampered by the necessity of explaining his plot, and of describing the *dramatis personæ* through the mouth of a single actor; and so the sensitive lover has to tell of his meeting with the young lord, his rival, who,

“Leisurely tapping a glossy boot,
 And curving a contumelious lip,
 Gorgonised me from head to foot
 With a stony British stare.”

This sharp figure-drawing, almost caricature, would be excellent in a novel or upon the stage; but when it is interposed among tender idyllic melodies there is a jar upon the delicate ear; there is a lapse into undignified expression which is incompatible with the refined exaltation of tone that is essential to a romantic passion-play. In his beautiful song of rapturous

expectation, "Come into the garden, Maud," the poet rises to the highest point of his verse just when the drama reaches its climax; for the end of the romance has come, and the whole pageantry of love-making vanishes like a dream. The lovers are detected, there is a furious quarrel, a fatal duel; and the unfortunate hero is next found, mad with despair and remorse, on the coast of Brittany.

The first title proposed for the poem was "Maud and the Madness"; and a leading specialist for insanity wrote that it was the most faithful representation of madness since Shakespeare.¹ Such a certificate is but of moderate value in poetry, where success depends on artistic treatment of the subject; and in Shakespeare the disease is never more than an accessory to the delineation of his principal characters. Hamlet was mad only when he chose to be so; nor is it possible to agree with Tennyson when he said, in alluding to some captious reviews, that "without the prestige of Shakespeare Hamlet (if it came out now) would be treated in just the same way" by incompetent critics. The two characters, Hamlet and Maud's lover, will not bear a moment's comparison from any point of view. But delirium is far less manageable in a poem than in a play, where violent scenes and speeches are admissible; and if we allow for this inevitable difficulty of execution, it may be agreed that the wandering incoherent mind of Maud's lover in his madness is effectively rendered. The final strophes of the poem have some strenuous and animated lines, representing a puissant nation rising boldly to the alarm of war, which is to purge the people of sloth

¹ *Memoir.*

and mean cupidity, and to unite them in one patriotic impulse. Some such notions of fighting as a wholesome restorative had been engendered, in 1855, among home-keeping Englishmen by forty years of peace; but since that time they have learnt by experience what war really signifies; and the belief that it is a good medicine for the cankers of plethoric prosperity must now have fallen considerably out of fashion. Mr. Gladstone, in the *Quarterly Review* of 1855, protested against the doctrine that war is a cure for moral evil, or that it is a specific for the particular evil of Mammon worship. He maintained, on the contrary, that modern war is a remarkable incentive to that worship; though Tennyson might have replied that in Milton's great council of war Mammon's speech is ignobly pacific. There is at any rate a curious adumbration of recent incidents in one sentence of this article, where it is said that "war in its moral operation resembles, perhaps, more than anything else the finding of a gold-field." Mr. Gladstone, however, considerably qualified his first adverse judgment in a note (dated 1878) that he appended to this article when it was republished in his *Gleanings of Past Years* —

"Whether it is to be desired that a poem should require from common men a good deal of effort in order to comprehend it; whether all that is put into the mouth of the Soliloquist in 'Maud' is within the lines of poetical verisimilitude; whether this poem has the full moral equilibrium which is so marked a characteristic of the sister-works; are questions open, perhaps, to discussion. But I have neither done justice in the text to its rich and copious beauties of detail, nor to its great lyrical and metrical power. And what is worse, I have failed to comprehend rightly the relation between particular passages in the poem and its general

scope. This is, I conceive, not to set forth any coherent strain, but to use for poetical ends all the moods and phases allowable under the laws of the art, in a special form of character, which is impassioned, fluctuating, and ill-grounded. The design, which seems to resemble that of the Ecclesiastes in another sphere, is arduous; but Mr. Tennyson's power of execution is probably nowhere greater."

The allusion to Ecclesiastes is enigmatic, for the Preacher deals with neither love nor war, and his theme is that all luxury, pleasure, and the delight of the senses, are but vexation and vanity. If any resemblance with Tennyson's poetry is to be found in Ecclesiastes, it should be with the Palace of Art.¹

In the same article it is observed, truly, that Tennyson's war poetry is not equal to his poetry of peace. One may add that neither irony, nor fierce invective, suits Tennyson's genius very well; they carry him too near to the perilous domain of rhetoric. It is to the lays of love and heartrending lamentation in *Maud*, with their combined intensity and refinement, that unqualified praise may be accorded, to their romantic grace and their soft cadences, in which the melody seems inseparable from the meaning.

For Onomatopœia, which began by direct imitation

¹ Ecclesiastes ii. 4, 5, 6, 8, 11 —

"I made me great works; I builded me houses; I planted me vineyards:

* * * * *

"I gathered me also silver and gold, and the peculiar treasure of kings and of the provinces: I gat me men singers and women singers, and the delights of the sons of men, as musical instruments, and that of all sorts.

* * * * *

"Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do: and, behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun."

of natural sounds, has been developed by the highest art of poetry into prolonged associations of sound and sense. A single line may set the ear listening; it stirs the memory by recalling what has been once heard, or by making the words echo their significance, as for example in

“By the long wash of Australasian seas.”

And the subtle sensibility that adapts the word to the thing adapts the sentence or cadence to the general meaning or spirit of a whole passage,¹ reviving the impression of a summer dawn in a garden, the scent of flowers, “the voice of the long sea wave.” Recitation is a better test of these qualities than reading, for all poetry may be said to make its primary appeal to the ear; and even the length of the lines must have formed itself to a great degree on the natural conditions of respiration and oral delivery. It is versification regularly accentuated, with the terminal rhyme marking each line’s end harmoniously, that now chiefly delights the English ear, fixing the measure by a recurrent chime, a beautiful invention that is nevertheless a comparatively recent importation into European verse.

In our earliest poetry the place of the accents was indicated by alliteration; while since there was no terminal bar, the line’s length might be varied at the composer’s discretion. Some of the cantos in *Maud* seem to have been so far constructed on a similar principle, that the lines vary considerably in length, and the rhyme is sounded with remarkable skill at irregular intervals, marking fluctuations of emotion. We have here, in fact, something resembling

¹ See a dissertation on Onomatopœia in *Jowett’s Plato*, vol. i. p. 310.

what is called in France the *Vers Libre*, manipulated by a master of harmonies — a metrical arrangement of which, though it is no innovation in our poetry, Tennyson has made superior use. For although Southey discarded regularity of length in the verse of Thalaba and Kehama, the prevailing form in those poems is the ten-syllable blank verse metre, varied by shorter iambic lines, with a correctness of scansion that becomes monotonous. In *Maud* the poet by no means despises alliteration; he is rather apt to overstrain it occasionally as a method of enforcing the sense of a line by its sound, and of weighing its accentuation.

“The shrill-edged shriek of a mother divides the shuddering
night”

* * * * * * *

“And out he walked when the wind like a broken worlding
wailed,”

* * * * * * *

But the value of his experiment comes from his dexterity in expanding the undulating flexibility of the old English free verse, with the rhymes interposed as an accompaniment to the metre, and falling on the expectant ear like the chime of bells. Nor do we ever detect in Tennyson, as we do too often in Browning, the insincere or superfluous phrase that is brought in for the rhyme's sake, and is accommodated with more or less dexterity to the poet's real intention. Throughout his poetry we have constantly reason to admire his resource and capacity for shaping metrical forms to suit the impression that he desires to convey; while in such pieces as *The Talking Oak* we may appreciate the light and delicate touch of his hand upon the standard customary metres of our language,

Having by this time taken up his settled quarters at Farringford, Tennyson was now seriously occupied with his work upon the Arthurian legends, which had already furnished him with material for some of the best among his minor poems. Two Idylls were in print by 1857, and in 1859 the first four were published. The poet then took ship for Lisbon, whence he contemplated a journey into southern Spain; but he was an impatient traveller, who loved above all things his own land, not largely endued with the much-enduring temper of his Ulysses; so the autumnal heat and the mosquitoes drove him back to England within a month. Meanwhile, the Idylls were rapidly and widely taken up by the English public, with many congratulations from personal friends. Thackeray sends, after reading them, a letter full of his characteristic humour and good-fellowship —

“The landlord — at Folkestone — gave two bottles of his claret, and I think I drank the most; and here I have been lying back in the chair and thinking of those delightful Idylls, my thoughts being turned to you; and what could I do but be grateful to that surprising genius which has made me so happy.”

Jowett wrote enthusiastically of the “Maid of Astolat” —

“There are hundreds and hundreds of all ages, men as well as women, who, although they have not died for love (have no intention of doing so), will find there a sort of ideal consolation of their own troubles and remembrances.”

The Duke of Argyll’s praise is slightly, though unintentionally, ambiguous. “Your Idylls of the King,” he tells the author, “will be understood and admired by many who are incapable of understanding

and appreciating many others of your works." He goes on —

"Macaulay is certainly not a man incapable of *understanding* anything, but I knew that his tastes in poetry were so formed in another line that I considered him a good test, and three days ago I gave him 'Guinevere' —"

with the result that Macaulay was "delighted with it." Upon this Tennyson responds to His Grace somewhat caustically —

"MY DEAR DUKE, — Doubtless Macaulay's good opinion is worth having, and I am grateful to you for letting me know it, but this time I intend to be thick-skinned; nay, I scarcely believe that I should ever feel very deeply the punctures of those parasitic animalcules of the press, if they kept themselves to what I write, and did not glance spitefully and personally at myself. I hate spite."¹

Folklore has rarely undergone such changes of style and transformations of environment in its passage through different countries and successive generations, as the Arthurian legend has exhibited from its origin among the Celts of insular Britain to its latest revival in modern English poetry. The lays and tales of Arthur and his knights, the relics of a large number that have been lost, were saved from oblivion in England by the Anglo-Normans, whose poetic instinct led them to enjoy in their courts and castles the songs of wandering minstrels and popular stories of marvellous adventure. Thus the primitive element took a Romanesque fashion, and was expanded in the spirit of mediæval chivalry; the legends were translated into French and English,

¹ All these quotations are taken from the *Memoir*.

until at last they were gathered together and fixed permanently in an English form when Caxton printed Sir Thomas Malory's collection. A whole cycle surrounds the central figure of King Arthur, whom one may conjecture to have embodied the true tradition of some valiant chief who fought hard for his lands and his people against the Saxon invaders; for in a pre-historic age it is the real hero, famous when he lived, who becomes fabulous after his death. And so Arthur emerged out of a period of darkest confusion, trailing after him Christian myths and heroic legends; he passed through wandering minstrelsy to prose romance, and then again into poetry when he became the portrait, in Spenser's *Fairy Queen*, of a brave knight perfected in the twelve moral virtues, the leading actor in an allegory that is supposed to teach morals and politics under a transparent masque of adventurous knight-errantry.

“The generall end, therefore, of all the book is to fashion a gentleman or noble person in virtuous and gentle discipline, which for that I conceived shoulde be more plausible and pleasing, being coloured into an historical fiction, the which the most part of men delight to read, rather for variety of matter than for profite of the ensample, I chose the historye of King Arthur, as most fit for the excellency of his person, being made famous by many men's former works, and also furthest from the daunger of envy and suspicion of the present time.”¹

During the classical and rationalistic period of eighteenth-century poetry King Arthur's romantic figure suffered eclipse, until in the early nineteenth century Malory's book was republished. And lastly he shone out again fifty years later in the Idylls,

¹Spenser's "Letter to Sir Walter Raleigh" (1589).

modelled by Tennyson after the type used by Spenser, as the image of lofty morality, the modern gentleman, the magnanimous husband of an unworthy queen. As Spenser dedicated his poem to "Elizabeth, by the Grace of God, Queen of England, France, and Ireland and Virginia," so Tennyson offered the *Idylls* as his tribute to the Sovereign of far wider dominions:—

"But thou, my Queen,
 Not for itself, but thro' thy living love
 For one to whom I made it o'er his grave
 Sacred, accept this old imperfect tale,
 New-old, and shadowing Sense at war with Soul,
 Ideal manhood closed in real man,
 Rather than that gray king, whose name, a ghost,
 Streams like a cloud, man-shaped, from mountain peak,
 And cleaves to cairn and cromlech still; or him
 Of Geoffrey's book, or him of Malleor's, one
 Touch'd by the adulterous finger of a time
 That hover'd between war and wantonness."

Thus Arthur is still a poet's ideal and illustration of unstained virtue and manliness, with the difference that his environment of fairyland, enchantments, and adventurous gallantry, has become much more strange to modern readers than it was in the sixteenth century, when Spenser used the conventional romantic style and apparatus that were current in his day. Arthur does not even represent, in dim outline, the lineaments of some famous historical personage, like Charlemagne or even Roland; he is an unsubstantial and almost wholly fabulous model of chivalric perfection; the Round Table, the Knights errant, Merlin, the Holy Grail, are employed as the framework of a picture restored and repainted; the costumes and scenery of the drama are antique, with a revised

version of the characters. A modern romance of chivalry is necessarily a restoration, with the details of character, circumstance, and manners reproduced, as in Scott's romances, more or less accurately from the surviving records of the time. In the case of the Arthurian idylls this accessory work could not be done, because authentic materials are entirely wanting; the scenes, personages, and situations are either mythical, or at most reflect later mediæval ideas and types. To a certain extent this has been a drawback upon the popularity of a brilliant poetic enterprise; for it was inevitable that upon the critical, naturalistic, exacting temper of the nineteenth century in its third quarter the Idylls should have produced some feeling of incongruousness, of perfection in art with a lack of actuality — an impression of the kind that is delicately conveyed in a letter from Ruskin to Tennyson soon after the publication of the new poems. The four songs seemed to him the jewels of the crown, and certain passages he reckoned to be "finer than almost all you have done yet. Nevertheless" (he went on), "I am not sure but I feel the art and finish in these poems a little more than I like to feel it. Yet I am not a fair judge quite, for I am so much of a realist as not by any possibility to interest myself much in an unreal subject, to feel it as I should, and the very sweetness and stateliness of the words strike me all the more as *pure* workmanship. . . . Treasures of wisdom there are in it, and word-painting such as never was yet for concentration, nevertheless it seems to me that so great power ought not to be spent on visions of things past, but on the living present. For one hearer capable of feeling the depth of this poem, I believe ten would feel a depth quite as great if the stream flowed through things nearer the hearer. . . . I cannot but think that the intense, masterful, and unerring transcript of an actuality, and the relation of a story of

any real human life as a poet would watch and analyse it, would make all men feel more or less what poetry was, as they felt what Life and Fate were in their instant workings.”¹

Ruskin here touches and indicates a line of criticism upon the general conception of the Idylls, as shown by their treatment of the Arthurian legends, with which, although some may pronounce it inadequate, many may be disposed to agree. Romance-writing has been defined, half seriously, as the art of producing the literary work that can give the greatest imaginative pleasure to a people in the actual state of their habits and beliefs. The Idylls adapted the mythical tales of the Round Table to the very highest standard of æsthetic taste, intellectual refinement, and moral delicacy then prevailing in cultivated English society; and by that society they were very cordially appreciated. Undoubtedly the figure of Arthur—representing a warrior-king endowed with the qualities of unselfishness, clemency, generosity, and noble trustfulness, yet betrayed by his wife and his familiar friend, forgiving her, and going forth to die in a lost fight against treacherous rebels—has a grandeur and a pathos that might well affect a gravely emotional people. Moreover, the poem is a splendidly illuminated Morality, unfolding scenes and incidents that illustrate heroic virtues and human frailties, gallantry, sore temptations, domestic perfidy, chaste virginal love, and subtle amorous enchantments. It abounds also in descriptive passages which attest the close attention of the poet’s ear and eye to natural sights and sounds, and his rare faculty of fashioning his verse to their colours and echoes. In short, to quote from the *Memoir* :—

¹ *Memoir*.

“He has made these old legends his own, restored the idealism, infused into them a spirit of modern thought and of ethical significance ; setting his characters in a rich and varied landscape.”

This indeed he has done well. And yet these archaic stories, as they are told in Malory's fifteenth-century English, which preserves the romantic flavour, have never lost their hold on the English world at large. In their latest form they have to contend with the modern prejudice against unreality, against the sense that we have here a vision not merely of things that are past, but of things that could never have been, of a world that is neither ancient nor modern, but a fairyland peopled with knights and dames whose habits and conversation are adjusted to the decorous manners of our nineteenth century. In Malory's time the legends were apparently regarded by the ordinary reader as belonging to what we should call the Romance of History, for Caxton relates that he was much pressed “to empynte the noble history of the Saynt Graal and that most renowned crysten king, Arthur,” but that he long hesitated because of the opinion that all such books as had been made of Arthur had been “but fayned and fabled.” Yet when Malory's book was reprinted in 1634, the editor indignantly reprovèd, in his preface, the incredulity and stupidity of those who deny or make doubt of Arthur's immortal name and fame ; and as to the manner of writing, he affirmed that he has only corrected it where “King Arthur and some of his knights were declared to swear prophane and use superstitious speeches.” The tradition was still regarded as not wholly fictitious, with the charm of antique diction hanging about it to

encourage the illusion; and marvels and miracles, gods and giants, were commonly accepted with a kind of half belief by readers who took little account of the Improbable or the Unnatural. But this conventional understanding has long disappeared; the conceptions are now universally admitted to be "fayned and fabled"; and it has become much more difficult to use the old legends as mere vehicles for new manners and ideas than it was to translate the Celtic folklore into the language of mediæval romance. Spenser's *Fairy Queen* was frankly allegorical; and if we regard the *Idylls* also as beautiful allegories, we may be content, as their author was, with his suggestion that King Arthur represents conscience, and that the poem is a picture of the different ways in which men looked on conscience, some reverencing it as a heaven-born king, others ascribing to it an earthly origin — a philosophical argument set forth in a parable. We may then be satisfied with learning, from the poet himself, that "Camelot, for instance, a city of shadowy palaces, is everywhere symbolical of the gradual growth of human beliefs and institutions, and of the spiritual development of man." Symbolism is an instrument by which the severe and peremptory dictates of formal philosophy or religion are softened down and shaped for poetic expression; and in the light of this interpretation the *Idylls* are seen to be a finely woven tissue of figurative mysticism, clothing the antique forms with fresh esoteric meaning.

"The Holy Grail," said Tennyson, "is one of the most imaginative of my poems. I have expressed there my strong feeling as to the reality of the Unseen"; and truly in no other *Idyll* does the spiritual signifi-

cance stand out so clearly: it is the most successful of his excursions into this field of allegorical romance. From the same point of view we may admire and interpret, to a certain extent, the whole collection, though it must be remarked that stories with a moral lesson, however beautifully told, are not precisely allegories. Moreover, Tennyson has also said that "there is no single fact or incident in the *Idylls*, however seemingly mystical, which cannot be explained without any mystery or allegory whatever," and he constantly protested against pressing too far the search for an inner meaning; he would not admit an obligation to find it everywhere. He would have probably accepted the theory that his poem should be treated as a renewed presentation of the tragic experience of life, where men and women pay the inevitable penalty of sin and vice; and where nevertheless the highest nobility of character will not always ward off unmerited disaster and final catastrophe. The legend of a king's ruin through his wife's infidelity is an ancient tale of wrong, that has stamped itself on the popular imagination by its dramatic force and the contrast of characters. Arthur the King, Lancelot the chief warrior of his host, Guinevere the peerless beauty who brings discord between them, Modred the traitor knight, represent personages that belong to epic and romance in various distant ages and countries; the traitor meets his punishment, but the hero perishes unhappily. Such was the lesson of the primitive story-teller, from Homer downward, who drew life from natural experience, not as it is seen through the romantic colouring of a softer moralising age. And the same lesson is to

be read in the Idylls, although the action of the drama, the conduct and character of the leading personages, are applied and brought home to the modern reader by so far readjusting them as to bring them nearer to the feelings and proprieties of the present day. They are made more probable in order that they may be more impressive; the poet has preserved the ideals, clothing them in new conventional garments.

That Tennyson could excel in the art of veiling an experience of all ages under an allegory we know from his short poem, *The Lady of Shalott*, where the mirror of the shadows of the passing world, and the magic web that the lady weaves wearily, are brought in to give an atmosphere of mystery to the story of the Maid of Astolat's hopeless passion for Lancelot. But in the Idyll of *Lancelot and Elaine* the treatment is no longer mysterious but naturalistic; we have the maiden's timid adoration of the magnificent knight, the grief and trouble of her father and brothers, and the Queen's angry jealousy at hearing that Lancelot is wearing the maiden's token. The shy sweetness of Elaine, who is dying of unrequited love, is contrasted with the figure of the superb imperious Guinevere, who scorns her husband, "a moral child without the craft to rule," and sharply suspects her paramour. Lancelot offers her the diamonds which he has won with a sore wound at a tournament, and she flings them out of her window into the river, just as the barge with the dead Maid of Astolat comes floating down before the palace. This incident has a distant resemblance to some drama of modern society, and, indeed, the moral of this Idyll is so plain as to need no allegorical interpretation; it

is a true parable and warning for men and women always and everywhere. The Idyll interweaves some magnificent embroidery upon the unvarnished canvas of the old romance; it contains the plaintive song—

“Sweet is true love tho’ given in vain, in vain;
And sweet is death who puts an end to pain” —

the sighing of innocent love sinking to quiet despair — with many passages of tender grace and animating imagery —

“They couch’d their spears and prick’d their steeds, and thus,
Their plumes driv’n backward by the wind they made
In moving, all together down upon him
Bare, as a wild wave in the wide North-sea
Green-glimmering toward the summit, bears, with all
Its stormy crests that smoke against the skies,
Down on a bark, and overbears the bark,
And him that helms it, so they overbore
Sir Lancelot and his charger.”

At the central situation and catastrophe of the Arthurian epic we have a still more remarkable reconstruction of plot and character. In the old chronicle, when Lancelot and Guinevere are at last entrapped and beset, the knight fights his way out, and the Queen is condemned by her husband to be burnt alive, but is rescued by Lancelot after much bloodshed; and the great war begins in which the whole Table Round is dissolved. Lancelot surrenders the Queen to King Arthur, who takes her back as Menelaus took Helen back to Lacedæmon; there is the same sentiment of a woman’s comparative irresponsibility when fierce warriors are contending for her; and Guinevere does not become a nun until Arthur has

been slain in the last battle. The sympathy of the chronicle is entirely with Guinevere —

“Therefore, all ye that be lovers, call into your remembrance the moneth of May, as did Queen Guinevere, for whom I make here a little mention, that while she loved she was a true lover, and therefore she had a good end.”

She is here the persistent type of the fatal woman who brings about a hero's death, the legendary cause of wars, assassinations, and the loss of kingdoms, as she is still the cause of bloodsheds and revengeful murders among warlike tribes; her misconduct is now in civilised society no more than a private misfortune, it was formerly a public calamity. And yet the old Celtic romance treats Guinevere with indulgence and pity, for it is a tale of unhappy love. In Tennyson's Idyll the tone and management of the situation have been carefully adjusted to the ethical sentiment of the present time. The King, when he visits the Queen in the nunnery to which she has fled, promises that she shall be protected; he leaves men

“To guard thee in the wild hour coming on,
Lest but a hair of this low head be harm'd.”

But he will never see her again —

“I hold that man the worst of public foes
Who either for his own or children's sake,
To save his blood from scandal, lets the wife
Whom he knows false, abide and rule the house.
* * * * *
Better the King's waste hearth and aching heart
Than thou reseated in thy place of light,
The mockery of my people, and their bane.”

The unfortunate Queen, left alone, pours out her re-

morse at having preferred an ardent lover, the flower of chivalry, to her blameless King, whom she had once found too immaculate —

“ A moral child without the craft to rule,
 Else had he not lost me.
 * * * * * * *
 I thought I could not breathe in that fine air,
 That pure severity of perfect light.
 I yearned for warmth and colour, which I found
 In Lancelot.”

Thus in Tennyson's poem we have the faithless wife and injured husband of our own society; a woman's agonised repentance and a man's stern justice that is neither hard nor unforgiving; we have the costumes, the scenery, and the *dramatis personæ* of the old romance with a change of feeling and manners. The result is, in the first place, that the excellent Arthur lacks tragic quality; he does not interest us sufficiently; while there is even something tame, from the dramatic point of view, in his high-minded generosity toward Guinevere. Secondly, to a mind prepossessed with the exactitude of modern taste, the scene between the King and Queen at Amesbury, notwithstanding its elevation of tone and austere purity of feeling, suggests something like a splendid anachronism, though as a moral lesson, nobly delivered, it has indisputable power and beauty. The poet is undoubtedly entitled to illustrate universal truths by striking off a new and powerful impression from the unchanging types of human character; yet those who have no great skill at deciphering the Hyponoia, the underlying significance of the Idylls, may be pardoned for confessing to a feeling of something remote, shadowy, and spectacular

in the company of these mediæval knights and dames, wizards and wantons, who pass over the stage and perform their parts before an audience whose deeper thoughts have long ceased to run in the vein of fantastic allegory. The unreality of the whole environment inevitably diminishes the dramatic effect.

The story of *Tristram and La Belle Iseult*,¹ which is perhaps the most beautifully pathetic in the whole cycle of Romance, stirring all hearts with sympathy for irresistible ill-fated passion, is left half told in Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, though Lancelot alludes to Tristram's treacherous murder by King Mark. Nor has Tennyson, in his *Idyll of the Last Tournament*, availed himself of the supremely poetical ending of the old legend, when Tristram, mortally wounded, sends a messenger across the sea to bring Iseult of Cornwall, his first love, to Brittany. The returning vessel, when it comes within sight from the Breton shore, is to hoist a white sail if it is bringing Iseult, a black sail if she has refused to come. But Iseult of Brittany, his wife, tells him falsely that the vessel has been sighted with a black sail, whereupon Tristram, who had kept himself alive ["*retenait sa vie*"] until then, lets himself expire; and Iseult of Cornwall lands only to die of grief over his body. Here the dominant feeling is of pity and pardon for broken-hearted lovers, but in the *Idyll of the Last Tournament* Tristram's story has the conclusion of another and probably a later version, which is sudden and violent. King Mark, Arthur's antitype, is the suspicious and vindictive husband, who surprises Tristram with his wife, and kills him in the arms of Iseult; there is

¹Or "*Isoude*."

here no allegory or romantic circumstance, but the sombre morality of a doom like that of Francesca da Rimini, of lovers whose fate melted even the austerity of Dante. One might wish that Tennyson had preferred the softer and more compassionate ending; the more so because the story of Tristram, lying with failing breath in his castle that overlooked the sea, and receiving his death stroke from the word brought him of the black sail, would have given ample scope for finely wrought descriptive poetry, and for touching the highest chords of emotion. Yet the Idyll tells its own story forcibly, without effort or exaggeration of language; the shadow of danger grows darker over the amorous discourse of Tristram and Iseult in her bower, where the reckless passion of the woman and the kindling desire of the man blind them to the impending calamity, until their lips meet —

“ But, while he bow'd to kiss the jewell'd throat,
Out of the dark, just as the lips had touch'd,
Behind him rose a shadow and a shriek —
'Mark's way,' said Mark, and clove him through the brain.”

The poem has several examples of Tennyson's singular skill in briefly sketching broad landscapes —

“ But Arthur with a hundred spears
Rode far, till o'er the illimitable reed,
And many a glancing plash and sallowy isle,
The wide-wing'd sunset of the misty marsh
Glared on a huge machicolated tower.”

Again —

“ As the crest of some slow-arching wave,
Heard in dead night along that table-shore,
Drops flat, and after the great waters break
Whitening for half a league, and thin themselves,
Far over sands marbled with moon and cloud.”

Or a single line may be the setting of a picture, as in

“The long low dune and lazy plunging sea.”

And in the *Passing of Arthur*, when the King is following Modred to the down by the seaside, where he is to fight the last “dim weird battle of the west,” the poet again shows his power of fixing by a few strokes the impression of a desolate wilderness bounded by the sky-lines of mountain and sea.

“Then rose the King and moved his host by night,
 And ever push’d Sir Modred, league by league,
 Back to the sunset bound of Lyonesse —
 A land of old upheaven from the abyss
 By fire, to sink into the abyss again ;
 Where fragments of forgotten peoples dwelt,
 And the long mountains ended in a coast
 Of ever-shifting sand, and far away
 The phantom circle of a moaning sea.”

In this *Idyll*, the last of the series, we have Tennyson’s *Morte d’Arthur* fragment of 1842, reproduced with additions at the beginning and the end to carry on and wind up the epical narrative, and to point the moral intention. The fantastic folklore no longer disconcerts us, the final Act of the drama is purely heroic. We have a clear view of a noble ruler of his people, born out of his due time, who after striving to realise a lofty ideal of justice and humanity in a wild age, finds the whole fabric of his State ruined by domestic perfidy and armed rebellion, and marches full of doubt and despondency to the battle in which he is to fall and to disappear mysteriously.

“For I, being simple, thought to work His will,
 And have but stricken with the sword in vain ;

And all whereon I lean'd in wife and friend
Is traitor to my peace, and all my realm
Reels back into the beast, and is no more.
My God, Thou hast forgotten me in my death :
Nay — God my Christ — I pass but shall not die."

The two armies meet, shrouded in a white mist by the seashore, in a stubborn fight, until

“ When the dolorous day
Grew drearier toward twilight falling, came
A bitter wind, clear from the North, and blew
The mist aside, and with that wind the tide
Rose, and the pale King glanced across the field
Of battle : but no man was moving there.”

He sees Modred, kills him with one last stroke, and falls all but slain. Then follows the well-known episode of the casting of his sword Excalibur into the mere, and the appearance of the dusky barge with the black-hooded Queens.

In no other part of the entire poem is the magic of the old romance so finely interfused with allegory as at the close of this Idyll, where patriotic courage and virtue are seen contending vainly against the powers of evil, against that adverse Fate, otherwise inexorable Circumstance, which is too strong for human endeavour, and shapes man's visible destiny. Just as neither valour, nor unflinching devotion to his city, nor nobility of character, could save Hector from death, or Andromache from bitter servitude, so against Arthur the hard facts of life must prevail, and he perishes with all his knights save one. His enchanted sword, the emblem of personal prowess, is thrown back to the water fairy as a sign that his warfare is ended; and

the three Queens with whom he sails away to the island-valley of Avilion may be, to those who seek for an inner meaning, symbolical of the angels who bear away to heaven the soul of a brave warrior. One may well believe that the *Morte d'Arthur* legend is, like the *Chanson de Roland*, the far-descended survival of a genuine tradition of some ancient battle, in which a renowned chief was defeated and slain with the flower of his fighting men. Roland, like Arthur, survives to the last; his dying effort is to break his sword Durandal, as Arthur's is to have Excalibur flung into the lake. But Durandal will not break, for there are holy relics in the hollow of the hilt; Roland confesses his sins, commends himself to God, and St. Michael and St. Gabriel take charge of his soul. We are here in the full atmosphere of Christian piety and the mediæval Church, uncoloured by that free myth-making imagination, the primitive semi-pagan element, which Tennyson has retained to give its charm and glamour to his verse. His poem closes, epically, with the vanishing of Arthur; though the prose chronicle goes on to relate how Lancelot bade farewell to Guinevere in her cloister, followed her funeral to Glastonbury, died there of grief at her tomb, and was buried in his castle of Joyous Garde, where Sir Ector finds men singing the dirge over him "full lamentably." There was good matter here for another Idyll, but the sequel might have disturbed the unity of Tennyson's plan; and moreover the doleful complaint of Sir Ector over Lancelot's body, with its piercing simplicity of words and feeling, rises so nearly to the highest level of heroic poetry — of such passages as Helen's lament over Hector's corpse in the *Iliad* — that even Tenny-

son's art could hardly have paraphrased it successfully.

If, after reading through the *Idylls*, we take up *Enoch Arden*, which followed them in 1864, the contrast of style and subject is again remarkable. This poem begins by the sketch of a little seaport on the East Anglian coast, with the nets, old boats, and ship timber strewed about the shore, and it winds on through the tale of a fisherman's homely joys and griefs, reminding us of Crabbe, without the quality of hard pathos which Tennyson found in him; for the tone is softer and there are more gleams of colour. Moreover, although the poet has done his best to lower the pitch of his instrument into harmony with a quiet unadorned narrative, yet he cannot refrain here and there from some effort in describing common things poetically. With Crabbe, a full fish-basket would not have been "ocean spoil in ocean-smelling osier"; nor would Enoch's face have been "rough-reddened with a thousand winter gales," when a hundred might have been overmuch for a sailor not thirty years old by the story. Nevertheless the opening lines have the concise plain-speaking of the Suffolk poet, with the same method of grouping details in the foreground of a picture; and with the difference that Tennyson widens his prospect, giving it distance and air by a sky-line —

“Long lines of cliff breaking have left a chasm;
And in the chasm are foam and yellow sands;
Beyond, red roofs about a narrow wharf
In cluster; then a moulder'd church; and higher
A long street climbs to one tall-tower'd mill;

And high in heaven behind it a gray down
 With Danish barrows. . . .

* * * * *

Here on this beach a hundred years ago,
 Three children of three houses, Annie Lee,
 The prettiest little damsel in the port,
 And Philip Ray the miller's only son,
 And Enoch Arden, a rough sailor's lad
 Made orphan by a winter shipwreck, play'd
 Among the waste and lumber of the shore,
 Hard coils of cordage, swarthy fishing-nets,
 Anchors of rusty fluke, and boats updrawn."

Enoch Arden marries, but is forced by stress of poverty to leave his wife and home on a distant voyage. It is when the sailor, escaping from shipwreck, lands alone on a tropical island, that the scene begins to glow, and the verses to fill with sound —

"He could not see the kindly human face,
 Nor ever hear a kindly voice, but heard
 The myriad shriek of wheeling ocean-fowl,
 The league-long roller thundering on the reef,
 The moving whisper of huge trees that branch'd
 And blossom'd in the zenith."

And while he wanders under the glare of unclouded noonday amid palms and ferns, in the glittering heat of land and water, his mind's eye sees his English home far away —

"The chill
 November dawns and dewy-glooming downs,
 The gentle shower, the smell of dying leaves,
 And the low moan of leaden-colour'd seas."

The tale is founded on an incident that must have been common enough in the foretime, particularly among seafaring people, when men wandered abroad and were lost, or found their way home after many

years, to be welcomed or disowned by their families as the case might be. It is the *Odyssey* of humble mariners, and many traces of it may be found in the folklore and in the superstitions of Asia as well as of Europe, where the forgotten husband is liable to be treated on his reappearance as a ghostly *revenant*, or even as a demon who has assumed a dead man's body in order to gain entrance into the house. In most of these stories, as in a rude English sea ballad that used to be well known, and in an old French song of the Breton coast, the Penelope of a small household has yielded to her suitors and married again as in *Enoch Arden*, and as in *Crabbe's Tale of the Parting Hour*, where the castaway mariner comes back to find his sweetheart an elderly widow. But in the ancient epic and also in these folk-tales the next step is for the husband to declare his identity and to demand his rights most vigorously, as Ulysses did, but as *Enoch Arden* does not. The popular ending, founded probably on real life, is that the man who has been supplanted in his absence finally accepts the situation and retires disconsolately, or, as in the novel of *Gil Bias*, philosophically. Tennyson has preferred, rightly for the purpose of his art, a conclusion of pathetic self-sacrifice; and *Enoch*, after one sight of his wife and children in a cheerful home, which is tenderly described, accepts oblivion, and resolves that they shall never discover him alive —

“ But if my children care to see me dead,
Who hardly knew me living, let them come,
I am their father ; but she must not come,
For my dead face would vex her after-life.”

The poem has been dramatised in London and New

York, was translated into Latin, and into seven different European languages; while in France alone seven translations, most of them annotated, have been made; and Professor A. Beljame of the Paris University has written a most able study of the versification in *Enoch Arden*. It is indeed an excellent piece of work, which for sincerity of feeling, distinctness of outline, and restraint in language, may be matched with the poem of *Dora*; while by comparing it with *Aylmer's Field*, that appeared in the same volume, we can take a measure both of Tennyson's strength and of his imperfections in the delineation of contemporary life, outside the field of romance.

The story in *Aylmer's Field* runs upon the same theme as in *Maude and Locksley Hall*, with a variation of plot and circumstance. It reproduces the somewhat commonplace situation of two playmates, boy and girl, who fall in love with each other on reaching the age of indiscretion, whereupon the rich and haughty squire indignantly ejects the young man, breaking off the engagement, and breaking his daughter's heart in consequence. The lover kills himself, and his brother, the parish clergyman, takes the whole miserable affair as his text for a sermon that denounces the idols of wealth and pedigree, and shows God's punishment upon worldly pride. It might be wished that Tennyson, whose special talent did not lie in wielding the scourge, should have perceived that extreme condemnation of this particular kind of social injustice is liable to take a false air of sentiment which embarrasses the impressive treatment of the situation in poetry.

“Sir Aylmer Aylmer, that almighty man,
The county God,”

is too conventional a figure, obviously magnified, and has served too long under novel-writers, to be promoted into the upper rank of poetical characters; and it is ineffectual to write him down "insolent, brainless, heartless . . . an old pheasant lord and partridge breeder," for the lash falls in vain on the back of a callous society, to whom worldly considerations for Sir Aylmer's motives, if not for his manners, appeal with some extenuating force; and who might rejoin that the Lord of Burleigh's marriage with a lowly maiden turned out unhappily. Nor is the morality of the story indisputable. Is Sir Aylmer's iniquity so deep as to justify a poet in bringing down the wrath of God upon his head, desolation upon his house, the dilapidation of his ancient hall, and the extinction of his family?

"The man became
 Imbecile; his one word was 'desolate';
 Dead for two years before his death was he:
 * * * * *
 Then the great Hall was wholly broken down,
 And the broad woodland parcell'd into farms;
 And where the two contrived their daughter's good,
 Lies the hawk's cast, the mole has made his run,
 * * * * *
 The slow-worm creeps, and the thin weasel there
 Follows the mouse, and all is open field."

Purse-pride and the infatuation of social prejudice are not sins dark enough for such a tremendous Nemesis; they fall rather within the jurisdiction of the contemptuous satirist, who can sometimes hit the mark in one cutting sentence, as when Swift says that you can tell what God thinks of wealth by noticing the kind of people on whom He thinks fit to bestow it.

CHAPTER V

PASTORALS ; TENNYSON'S PHILOSOPHY

LET us turn to another aspect of English life ; for, if his studies from the antique be excepted, no great English poet has travelled for his subjects more rarely beyond his native land than Tennyson. In such poems of rural scenery and character as *The May Queen* and *The Grandmother*, we have the annals of the village, in youth and age, told with a sweet and serious feeling, in flowing monosyllabic lines that affect and captivate a reader by their freedom from varnishing or emphasis. Their composition has not the unconscious simplicity of *Auld Robin Gray*, where the resemblance to a genuine ballad comes from that absence of colouring adjectives [there is but one in all the eight stanzas] which is the note of all primitive and popular verse — a woodnote wild that is very seldom caught and domesticated by elaborate culture. Tennyson's genius was essentially cultivated and picturesque ; he laid on his tints with the artistic design of illuminating the beauty of quiet nature, or he filled in with descriptive particulars in order to produce the scene's general impression, as in the following stanza : —

“ When the flowers come again, mother, beneath the waning
light
You'll never see me more in the long gray fields at night ;

When from the dry dark wold the summer airs blow cool
 On the oat-grass and the sword-grass, and the bulrush in the
 pool,"

which is in a style quite different from that of unlettered verse-makers.

Yet the plaintive lament of the May Queen for her doom of early death, and the sadness of old age recalling the memories of youth, are presented with a truth and earnestness that touch universal human affections and the sense of mortality; and the language is purely poetical, with the same exclusion of dialect or imitation of rustic talk that is seen in all Wordsworth's pastorals. These poems of Tennyson aim at, and do not fall far short of, the "simplicity of diction" which Wordsworth affirmed that he had introduced into English verse as the proper medium for rendering the elementary feelings of the country-folk and showing the poetical aspect of common things. Wordsworth's principle, as explained in his Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, was to choose incidents and situations of rural life, and to describe them as far as possible in the language really used by the people, purified, indeed, from grossness and uncouth provincialisms. Good prose, he maintained, was the proper vehicle for this kind of poetry: his object was to clothe the thoughts and characters in plain close-fitting words, adapting the speech to the situation. It was not difficult for Coleridge to prove, in the well-known criticism that is to be found in his *Biographia Literaria*, that language so purified was very different from the true vulgar tongue; that Wordsworth, in fact, used good plain English vivified and elevated poetically, and was at his worst in the lines which come nearest to commonplace rustic

conversation. Moreover, Wordsworth, though he did good service in discarding finally the old conventional pastoral, diverged habitually into philosophic reflections that were manifestly and intentionally out of keeping with his rustic characters. In the two poems of *The May Queen* and *The Grandmother* Tennyson makes no pretence of imitating the language of his villagers; his object is to translate their genuine feelings poetically; he simplifies his diction and strips it of superfluous ornament; but no man knew better that real idiomatic vernacular is a very different thing. What this is, and the use that can be made of it, he has shown separately. He does not relate a story and moralise upon it, as Wordsworth usually did; he exhibits dramatic impersonations that portray the homely joys and griefs of the peasantry, that show how they act and what they say, in language that is nevertheless refined, correct, and vivid, and in a style which is the poet's own.

It will perhaps be admitted that this method of leaving his personages to speak for themselves was a novelty in the lyrics of rusticity. In subsequent poems Tennyson went one step further in compliance with the modern demand for what is called realism, by trying the bold experiment, upon which neither Wordsworth nor even Crabbe ever ventured, of making them speak in their own rough unpolished vernacular, as if they were acting their parts on a stage. This was the final death-blow to the tradition of the elegant pastoral. We have to remember that Burns was the first poet of genius who proved that the strenuous racy speech of the people contained elements of high poetic value, being of course led to the discovery by the fact that it

lay ready to his hand, for he himself was a poet born and bred up among the Scottish peasantry. In Scotland, as in the New England of America, there existed a true and widespread provincial dialect, which gave a national flavour and local associations to verses in which it was used; but in England, the home of ancient literary culture, the writing of verse in dialect or patois had never hitherto been attempted by any of the recognised poets (and they are numerous) who have condescended to the short and simple annals of the village.¹ That Tennyson, the mystical romancer, the dreamer of fair women, should also have written spirited verses full of rude and quaint humour, sometimes even too redolent of the soil, is a notable example of his versatility. And his Northern Farmer set the fashion, in England, of drawing character-sketches in rough-hewn verse that imitates not only the speech but the accent of all sorts and conditions of unsophisticated men. It is a form of metrical composition that has lately spread, as a species of modern ballad, throughout the British Empire and the United States of America, but has little or no existence in any language except the English.²

FitzGerald, after reading the "Holy Grail," writes (1870) to Tennyson —

"The whole myth of Arthur's Round Table Dynasty in Britain presents itself before me with a sort of cloudy, Stonehenge grandeur. I am not sure if the old Knight's adventures

¹ William Barnes, who first published his poems in the Dorsetshire dialect in 1833, can hardly be ranked among the higher poets.

² Such poems as those of Mistral in the *Provençal* dialect belong, I think, to a different order.

do not tell upon me better, touched in some lyrical way (like your own 'Lady of Shalott'), than when elaborated into epic form. . . . Anyhow, Alfred, while I feel how pure, noble, and holy your work is, and whole phrases, lines, and sentences of it will abide with me, and, I am sure, with men after me, I read on till the 'Lincolnshire Farmer' drew tears to my eyes. I was got back to the substantial rough-spun Nature I knew; and the old brute, invested by you with the solemn humour of Humanity, like Shakespeare's *Shallow*, became a more pathetic phenomenon than the knights who revisit the world in your other verse."

In the two poems of the Northern Farmer, indeed, we have verisimilitude of portraiture and authentic delineation of character, preserving the type and developing its peculiar features by the insight that belongs to the observing faculty, with artistic fidelity in details. Yet the treatment of these subjects needs much discrimination and reserve; for unless there is a solid foundation of point and humour, the dialect becomes mere jargon; and the particulars must never be *too* inelegant, nor must the verse be overcrowded with phonetic pronunciations. The Northern Cobbler, which betrays defects of this kind, must be ranked, critically, below the Farmer; and the Village Wife has a certain triviality of voluble talk which may be true enough to nature, but hardly supports her claim to a niche in a poetic gallery of national portraits.

"'Ouse-keeper sent tha, my lass, fur New Squire coom'd last
night.

Butter an' heggs — yis — yis. I'll goä wi' tha back; all
right;

Butter I warrants be prime, an' I warrants the heggs be as
well,

Hafe a pint o' milk runs out when ya breäks the shell."

Take away the queer spelling, and turn the lines into ordinary English, and you have commonplace domestic prose hardly worth putting into rhyme. By the same test *The Spinster's Sweet-'Arts* must be reckoned among the less successful excursions into the field of low life, for even there it is dangerous to descend among ignoble particulars, and the Art of Sinking consists in avoiding degradation —

“ To be horder'd about, an' waäked, when Molly'd put out the
light,
By a man coomin' in wi' a hiccup at ony hour o' the
night!
An' the taäble staäin'd wi' 'is aäle, an' the mud o' 'is boots
o' the stairs,
An' the stink o' 'is pipe i' the 'ouse, an' the mark o' 'is 'eäd
o' the chairs ! ”

“ Roden Noel,” writes Tennyson, “ calls the two Northern Farmers photography; but I call them imaginative ” — as of course they are, being far above mere exact presentations of individuals. And in proportion as photography, the bare indifferent printing off of things as they are, predominates in this kind of work, it becomes no fit business for a master of poetical grace and distinction. Here, again, we may refer to Coleridge's criticism on Wordsworth's Preface, where he (Wordsworth) explains that he has chosen low and rustic subjects, because in that condition the essential passions of the heart are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language. To this Coleridge replies that low and rustic life is in itself unpoetic, and that poetry must idealise. Where Wordsworth does idealise, he says, his figures have the representative quality; where the poet goes too

close to the real native product, as in the "Idiot Boy," he becomes commonplace; and when he describes a dull and garrulous man exactly, he becomes himself dull. So, also, when Tennyson gives us the vulgar tongue in its full flavour, the poetical element is overpowered and disappears.

But if it must be admitted that passages like these are blemishes on the picture, "in truth to nature missing truth to art," we may regard them as an overbalance of Tennyson's proclivities, as lapses on the side to which his genius leans. Throughout his poetry, from the highest to the humblest subject, runs a vivid objectivity; he sees things in strong relief, and they are impressed with a sharp edge upon a very receptive mind. Even at the times when he is dropping his plummet into the abyss of the mysteries that encompass human existence and destiny, he rarely carries abstract thought to any depth; he returns to the surface and refreshes himself among the forms of the visible world. Here he is in his proper domain, in his power of exact delineation, of recording briefly the sensation received and retained, by looking (for example) attentively at a wide prospect, and taking out of it the suggestion or the similitudes, reading from it the language or discourse of Nature. And as in his best work he takes accurate notice of minor things, of wild flowers and foliage, of a weasel's faint cry or a bird's call, or even of a cow's wrinkled throat in the play of sunlight, so when he is giving us the rough side of life he has occasionally fallen into excess of naturalism by his propensity for minute observation of things that will not bear inspecting too closely.

Yet his pre-eminent gift was for the imaginative apprehension of beauty, and his practice is exemplified in the record of his journeys. In 1860, for example, he made an excursion to Cornwall and the Scilly Islands, gathering a harvest of impressions from the views of the coast, the cliffs, the long curving sweep of the sandy shore, the towering Atlantic breakers, and jotting down the "nature-similes," which, being afterwards grafted into his verse, became the decorative framework that contained and gave a local habitation to his Arthurian legends. Then he returned to Farringford, with its careless ordered garden close to the edge of a noble down, where his friends visited him, and listened to his table talk, and heard him read his poems. In 1861 he was in Auvergne, surveying, for the most part silently, the mountains, lakes, and torrents; whence the party travelled southward to the Pyrenees, meeting Arthur Clough at Luchon, with continual additions throughout the journey to the poetic sketch-book. He could thus fix in a few words the sensations of the moment, fresh and distinct, storing them for eventual use either descriptively, as part of a narrative, or as metaphors to expand and give forms to a thought. It may be noticed, by the way, that the most famous of Tennyson's contemporary poets in France worked by precisely the same method. Victor Hugo's "*Couchers du Soleil*" are careful studies from nature of the tones and forms of a landscape under the setting sun. Both these great artists sought to fix accurately the scene, and to translate the momentary sensation into accordance with the thought that it awakened, to use it as the background or environment of human action,

or merely to obtain a fresh image for the poetic embodiment of an idea, in substitution for images that have been worn out or become obsolete by long usage. Metaphor lies at the base of all language; and while the first man who spoke of running water conveyed his thought by an image which invested the stream with a being like his own, the poets latterly resorted to metaphor, or to myth—which is in their hands metaphor personified—as a mere repertory for figurative expression. When the thought at once strikes out the image, it comes fresher from the mint than when the image has been noted and treasured up beforehand for illustration of thought or action. It may be observed that Tennyson never uses what may be called the mythological device; he never appeals directly to the ocean or the mountain as if it were a living embodiment of Nature, as Byron does; he absorbs and translates the impress of inanimate things upon the perceptive mind. A year later we find him making similar studies for his poetry from the crags and dismantled castles of Derbyshire and Yorkshire. It would seem that his wandering in the quiet familiar scenery of England served him best in this way; since, if we may judge from a letter written immediately after his return from abroad, his reminiscences of a journey through France were troubled by a kind of resentment against the annoyances that never failed to discompose him in strange lands, and which in this instance appear to have affected his health.

“France, I believe, overset me, and more especially the foul ways and unhappy diet of that charming Auvergne; no

amount of granite craters or chestnut-woods, or lava-streams, not the Puy de Dôme which I climbed, nor the glen of Royat where I lived, nor the still more magnificent view of the dead volcanoes from the ascent to Mont Dore could make amends for those drawbacks; so we all fell sick by turns. . . . I remain with a torpid liver, not having much pleasure in anything.”¹

Nevertheless the course and circumstances of Tennyson's middle life were singularly untroubled and uneventful, leaving few turning-points or landmarks for the biographer. From straitened means in youth he had now passed to comparative affluence and the serenity of a well-ordered home; from distinction within a circle of choice friends to celebrity and eminence among the poets of his century. At Farringford, though his hours of work and meditation were properly set apart, his life was by no means secluded. He had many visitors and guests to whom he dispensed hospitality, and with them held the free discourse and interchange of ideas that reveal a man's character and opinions. His natural disposition was toward reserve and toward a certain taciturnity, that probably came from the habit of reflection and of fastidiousness in the choice of phrase; he spoke with intervals of silence.

After this manner the record of Tennyson's life runs in a dignified tranquillity, varied only by incidents that attest his established and spreading reputation as an illustrious man of letters, known by all Englishmen, and whose acquaintance was desired by distinguished foreign visitors to his country. In 1864 he received at Farringford Garibaldi, who planted a tree in the garden, and discoursed with him on Italian poetry.

¹ *Memoir.*

He writes to the Duke of Argyll: "What a noble human being! I expected to see a hero, and was not disappointed. When I asked if he returned through France, he said he would never set foot on the soil of France again. I happened to make use of the expression, 'That fatal debt of gratitude owed by Italy to Napoleon.' 'Gratitude,' he said; 'hasn't he had his pay, his reward? If Napoleon were dead, I should be glad; and if I were dead, he would be glad.'"¹ And yet there was prophetic truth in Tennyson's words, though not as he meant them; for the debt proved fatal, not to Italy, but to Napoleon, whose attachment to the cause of Italian liberty drew him into fatal complications that hampered all his foreign policy and contributed to his eventual downfall. The Longfellow from America, Professor Owen, Queen Emma of the Sandwich Islands, the son of the Abyssinian King Theodore, who lost life and kingdom in his war with the English, and Mr. Darwin—to whom Tennyson said, "Your theory of Evolution does not make against Christianity?" and Darwin answered, "No, certainly not"—may be mentioned to exemplify the variety of his visitors. We have a journal of a tour to Waterloo, with a careful survey of the battlefield, and thence to Weimar, where the party saw Goethe's house, with all his old boots at the entrance, and Goethe's coffin at the Fürstengruft. Tennyson joined, as might have been expected, the Committee for the defence of Governor Eyre, whose figure as the saviour of Jamaica struck the hardy temper of the English people, bringing out their unfailing readiness to pardon doing too much a great deal more easily than doing too little in

¹ *Memoir.*

a sharp emergency, and to be amazingly indulgent as to the methods employed.

In 1867 Tennyson was in negotiation for the land on Blackdown in Surrey, where he afterwards built Aldworth, on a site accessible only by a rough track across the sandy plateau of the down from the lanes above Haslemere; placing the house on a sheltered ledge of the uppermost part of the hill's slope southward, with a broad view over the Sussex weald to the South Downs and the sea, and Leith Hill standing out on the eastern horizon. Then in 1868-69 he went abroad with Mr. Frederick Locker, who has left notes on the philosophic discourse, always so attractive to Tennyson, that throws many side-lights on his poetry. Some of these reminiscences show his mystical propensity, the habit of ruminating indecisively over speculations which understand all visible things to be signs and shadows of things invisible, the intimations of eternal Power and Divinity.¹ His thoughts also ran upon the limited range of our sense-perceptions, and the relativity of our ideas to our ignorance, on Faith transcending the bounds of Reason, and on his own firm belief in Love, Virtue, and Duty. His mind wavered thus over the face of the deep waters, returning always to the solid ground of human affections and moral obligations, in accordance with the advice of Socrates, that where certainty is unattainable one should take the best and most irrefragable of human notions, and let this be the raft upon which life's voyage is to be made.

A few lines may be subjoined from the same notes,

¹ St. Paul, *Romans* i. 20.

to show the lighter side of Tennyson's character, so well known to all who had the privilege of his acquaintance.

“Balzac's remark that ‘Dans tout homme de génie il y a un enfant,’ may find its illustration in Tennyson. He is the only grown-up human being that I know of who habitually thinks aloud. His humour is of the dryest, it is admirable. . . . He tells a story excellently, and has a catching laugh. There are people who laugh because they are shy or disconcerted, or for lack of ideas . . . only a few because they are happy or amused, or perhaps triumphant. Tennyson has an entirely natural and a very kindly laugh.”¹

It was, indeed, this vein of simplicity, unsophisticated by conventionality, that often gave unexpected turns to his humour, while it had much to do with preserving that keen sense, or even enjoyment, of ludicrous incongruities, of the comic effects of indecorum or unconscious vulgarity, which he himself once noticed in Shakespeare. If his laugh was triumphant, it was from that sudden glory which Hobbes defines to be the cause of laughter at human imperfections; though no one was further above ill-natured scorn than Tennyson, or less prone to harsh judgment upon the ordinary follies and eccentricities of men.

It may be permissible, for the purpose of collating the impressions made by Tennyson on those who knew him well and saw him often about this time, to add here an extract from some recollections of his conversation that have been left by Mr. F. Palgrave—

“Every one will have seen men, distinguished in some line of work, whose conversation (to take the old figure) either ‘smelt too strongly of the lamp,’ or lay quite apart from their art and craft. What, through all these years, struck me about Tennyson, was that whilst he never deviated into poetical

¹ *Memoir.*

language as such, whether in rhetoric or highly-coloured phrase, yet throughout the substance of his talk the same mode of thought, the same imaginative grasp of nature, the same fineness and gentleness in his view of character, the same forbearance and toleration, the *aurea mediocritas* despised by fools and fanatics, which are stamped on his poetry, were constantly perceptible ; whilst in the easy and, as it were, unsought choiceness, the conscientious and truth-loving precision of his words, the same personal identity revealed itself.”¹

Here we have the large serenity of a poet in whom years are strengthening his philosophy of everyday life, while he was constantly pondering upon the mysteries which encompass all phenomenal existence. In the autumn of 1868, as we learn from a note prefixed by the editor of the *Nineteenth Century* review to an article, Tennyson and the Rev. Charles Pritchard were the guests of Mr. James Knowles ; and as the conversation had frequently turned on speculative subjects, it was suggested that a society might be formed “to discuss such questions after the manner and with the freedom of an ordinary scientific society.” This proposal was acted upon, with the result that some of the leading representatives of theological opinion, scientific research, and philosophic interest came together in the Metaphysical Society, of which Mr. Leslie Stephen has observed that four out of five of its members knew nothing of metaphysics. We learn from Mr. Knowles that the plan came first to be set on foot entirely through Tennyson’s adherence to it ; and although during the society’s existence of twelve years his attendance was infrequent — while he usually listened silently to the debates — one may guess that the papers read or discussed on problems that had always

¹ *Memoir.*

occupied his mind must have increased their attraction for him, and may have influenced the philosophic drift of his subsequent poetry. His poem on *The Higher Pantheism*, which he sent to be read before the Society, maintains the personality of God apart from the visible world, regarding spiritual beings as somehow incompatible with matter. The pure Pantheistic idea is a conception of universal Divine immanence, of the infinite interpenetrating the finite; but this might be held to exclude the notion of the world's moral government. And Tennyson's Higher Pantheism seems to aim at preserving the consciousness of a discrimination between infinite intelligence and the mind, whose perception of the finite world involves, or perhaps necessitates, a recognition of infinity beyond —

“The sun, the moon, the stars, the seas, the hills and the plains —

Are not these, O Soul, the Vision of Him who reigns ?

* * * * *

Earth, these solid stars, this weight of body and limb,

Are they not sign and symbol of thy division from Him ? ”

The soul has broken glimpses of the Divine vision ;
and the concluding lines —

“And the ear of man cannot hear, and the eye of man cannot see ;

But if we could see and hear, this Vision — were it not He ? ”

might be interpreted as leading up to the doctrine of Oriental theosophy — that only by escaping from sensation, by liberation from the bodily organs, can the soul attain clear knowledge of or unity with the Divine Being.

We know from Tennyson's earlier writings that a shadow of despondency and gloom, a sense of the incompleteness and failures of life, darkened his meditations on the condition and prospects of the human race; and his later poems show that he long retained this cloudy outlook upon the world. In 1864 he wrote an unpublished epigram upon "Immeasurable Sadness"; and if a collection were made of his dramatic monologues (which would be well worth doing), we should find that as time went on he dwelt more and more on the unhappiness of mankind. In *Locksley Hall* and *Maud* we had the vague dispirited murmuring of youth against the world's hard discipline; but we also had the lyrics of youthful ardour, love, and beauty. In the pastorals we have had the quiet joys and sorrows of the country folk. In his latter-day monologues the tragic view of things appears to spread and deepen; not vague discontent, but actual misery and anguish are his themes; the agony of *Rizpah*; the remorse, in *The Wreck*, of one who deserted her husband and lost her child; the vain repentance, in *The First Quarrel*, of a widow who parted with her husband in foolish anger —

‘ An’ the wind began to rise, an’ I thought of him out at sea,
 An’ I felt I had been to blame; he was always kind to me.
 ‘ Wait a little, my lass, I am sure it ’ill all come right’ —
 An’ the boat went down that night — the boat went down that
 night.”

The Children's Hospital is full of pain and tears; while in *Despair* we have the fury of a man half crazed by misfortune, who has been resuscitated after trying to drown himself. Instead of depicting a mood, a reverie, or a type of character, he now takes

up a striking anecdote of actual crime or suffering, and gives full play to his keen sensibility by a dramatic impersonation of the strongest emotions. The most poignant situation, more powerfully rendered than any other, is in Rizpah, where a mother has gathered up the fleshless bones of her son who has been hanged in chains for a robbery, and she hears the night-wind bring down his piteous cries to her:—

“ Wailing, wailing, wailing, the wind over land and sea—
 And Willy’s voice in the wind—‘O mother, come out
 to me.’
 Why should he call me to-night, when he knows that I cannot
 go?
 For the downs are as bright as day, and the full moon stares
 at the snow.

“ We should be seen, my dear ; they would spy us out of the town.
 The loud black nights for us, and the storm rushing over the
 down,
 When I cannot see my own hand, but am led by the creak of
 the chain,
 And grovel and grope for my son till I find myself drenched
 with the rain.”

It is a cruel story, barely fit for poetry, since the simple facts are so heartrending as to leave little scope for imaginative execution. Yet the long moaning lines have the sound of misery ; the details are worked up with unflinching precision ; and the sensation of utter grief, beyond all comfort or cure, is very forcibly conveyed. For a comparison of style, between the elaborate and the primitive, we may turn to the tale of Rizpah, the daughter of Aiah, told in the ancient chronicle with all the power of a few plain words, without ornament or commentary ; a sight as it was

seen on the Syrian hills, when the seven sons of Saul were hanged in propitiation of divine wrath, to stay the famine.

If we may now endeavour to sketch out some general view of Tennyson's attitude toward the great problems of human existence, it becomes necessary to read together, in this connection, the poems that he published at different times in his later years. In Tennyson's Rizpah we have a helpless woman crushed by a calamity that she could not avert; our compassion for her is unqualified. In Despair, on the other hand, we have a case of mental pathology; we are back again among intellectual difficulties: we have to consider the ethics of the situation, and to suspend our sympathy until we can satisfy ourselves that a man deserves it who would fling away his own life and his wife's because he has lost faith in God, is miserable in this world, and expects nothing from the world to come: —

“He is only a cloud and a smoke who was once a pillar of
fire,
The guess of a worm in the dust and the shadow of its
desire —
Of a worm as it writhes in a world of the weak trodden down
by the strong,
Of a dying worm in a world, all massacre, murder, and
wrong.”

Here indeed we have the lyric of despair, and the force of language has been strained to its uttermost pitch in expressing it. Yet we are not so carried away by the rush of the daring verse as to read without impatience the violent railing against all things human and divine by which this poor fellow seeks to excuse a somewhat abject surrender to misfortune and

materialism. Self-respect and the stoical temper unite to disown his behaviour; and the stress laid throughout the poem on the disastrous consequences of unbelief creates a suspicion that these frenzied denunciations are delivered with an eye on an audience; for the desperate half-drowned man makes shrewd hits at infidel science and strikes out against Calvinistic Theology.

“What! I should call on that Infinite Love that has served us
so well?

Infinite cruelty rather that made everlasting Hell,
Made us, foreknew us, foredoom'd us, and does what he will
with his own;

Better our dead brute mother who never has heard us groan.”

An argumentative intention underlies the rhapsody, weakens the logic of the situation, and produces a sense of dramatic insincerity. In one single line by Keats, “Here, where men sit and hear each other groan,” there is a deeper echo of human misery than in all this declamation, which belongs rather to the preacher than to the poet. But it reflects the shade of alarm that seems to have continually darkened Tennyson's mind when he brooded over subjects of this kind. In religion he was an optimist, holding a firm belief in the divine wisdom and goodness; though the aspect and course of Nature appears to have alternately encouraged and disheartened him; her calm beauty was seen to cover unmerciful indifference; and formal theology brought him no consolation. His imagination was haunted by a fear that scientific teaching would extinguish belief in a spiritual life to come, and would leave mankind desolate in a vast universe. One evening, we are told in the *Memoir*,

“he was talking on death, and quoting a Parisian story of a man having deliberately ordered and eaten a good dinner, and having afterwards committed suicide by covering his face with a chloroformed handkerchief. ‘That’s what I should do,’ he said, ‘if I thought there was no future life.’”

The remark, though recorded, can hardly have been made seriously; but it contains in essence the sentiment of his poem *Despair*, the sombre conception of pessimism as almost a justification of suicide. Unless the miserable condition of the masses can be improved — if want, unhappiness, and squalor are ineradicable, as they seem to be — the world, for the greater number of mankind, may as well end at once instead of rolling on through immense periods. And even if we are gradually advancing to a higher and happier life for all, what is the use of Progress if its end is to be a final extinction of all animated existence upon this planet? These are the two currents of thought that appear to have perplexed Tennyson’s meditations, and to run through such poems as *Despair*, and through *Locksley Hall Sixty Years After*¹ —

“Is it well that while we range with Science, glorying in the
Time,
City children soak and blacken soul and sense in city
slime?”

“There among the glooming alleys Progress halts on palsied
feet,
Crime and hunger cast our maidens by the thousand on the
street.”

And he still harps, in the same poem, on his feeling of the inutility of human effort, on his fear lest the dominion of science should deaden our spiritual aspira-

¹ 1887.

tions; he reminds us that our transitory existence in time is little worth, that progress and human perfectibility are illusions, and the world's history a tale of unmeaning bustle and agitation, signifying nothing, unless we keep alive the spiritual instincts and the hope of immortality —

“ Truth, for Truth is Truth, he worshipt, being true as he was
brave ;

Good, for Good is Good, he follow'd, yet he look'd beyond the
grave,

“ Wiser there than you, that crowning barren Death as lord of
all,

Deem this over-tragic drama's closing curtain is the pall !

* * * * *

“ Gone for ever ! Ever ? no — for since our dying race began,
Ever, ever, and for ever was the leading light of man.

* * * * *

“ Truth for truth, and good for good ! The Good, the True, the
Pure, the Just —

Take the charm ‘ For ever ’ from them, and they crumble into
dust.”

The stanzas have the rhythmic swell and regular fall of a chant by some prophetic seer looking backward and forward over the procession of ages, the spectator of all time and all existence, who distrusts the advance of civilisation, disdains mere physical betterment, and foretells dire conflicts in which the nobler qualities of man may perish in strife against misrule and sensuality. Toward the end comes a gentler and more hopeful note; yet the burden of the poem is still, as with *In Memoriam*, the oppressive immensity of space and time, in which religions and philosophic systems are lost like planks in an ocean, and those who cling to them are tossed about until they drop into the depths —

“Forward, backward, backward, forward, in the immeasurable sea,
Sway'd by vaster ebbs and flows than can be known to you
or me.

“All the suns — are these but symbols of innumerable man,
Man or Mind that sees a shadow of the planner or the plan ?

* * * * *

“What are men that He should heed us ? cried the king of
sacred song ;
Insects of an hour, that hourly work their brother insect
wrong,

“While the silent Heavens roll, and Suns along their fiery way,
All their planets whirling round them, flash a million miles
a day.

“Many an Æon moulded earth before her highest, man, was
born,
Many an Æon too may pass when earth is manless and
forlorn.”

Among these illimitable periods a life of seventy or eighty years is as nothing, and human efforts and aspirations sink into insignificance ; yet the old squire has the consolation that it is something to have had one's day, to have shared the lot of mankind and to have helped one's neighbours, and to stand at life's close in the old house, which is full of early memories of joy and sorrow. And so falls the curtain on Locksley Hall, the conclusion of a romantic drama that runs in a fragmentary way through so many of Tennyson's poems. If we connect the scattered links, we have the conception of fretful youth with ardent hopes and ambitions, of a passionate attachment that is broken off rudely and violently, of revolt against social injustice, of long wrestling with the spectres

of intellectual doubt and depression, of gradual schooling under the world's hard discipline, and of an old age passing quietly amid the scenes of boyhood, still troubled by the unintelligible enigma of the Universe, but with a softened retrospect over the past, and with such resignation as may be got from trusting that the immeasurable course of Evolution may tend to some far distant state of rest and happiness.

In *Vastness*¹ the figure of individual man has disappeared, and we have the same gloomy panorama of human energy and suffering contemplated from the point of its utter vanity and nothingness. The full organ-notes reverberate in lines that touch the highest scale of sublimity and grandeur in Tennyson's verse; but the poem is too heavily charged with contrasted images, and the light is too lurid —

“ Raving politics, never at rest — as this poor earth's pale
history runs, —

What is it all but a trouble of ants in the gleam of a million
million of suns ?

* * * * *

“ What the philosophies, all the sciences, poesy, varying voices
of prayer ?

All that is noblest, all that is basest, all that is filthy with all
that is fair ?

“ What is it all, if we all of us end but in being our own
corpse-coffins at last,

Swallow'd in *Vastness*, lost in Silence, drown'd in the deeps
of a meaningless past ? ”

The feeling that man is but dust and shadow, animated for a brief moment, that he is born to sorrow, and

¹ 1889.

that his works perish, is primeval in poetry and in religion; the starry heavens suggested it to the ancient sages and preachers no less vividly than all the discoveries of astronomy and geology. They confronted the eternal silences mournfully, yet with tranquil intrepidity; they drew lessons of composure and ethical fortitude from the spectacle; they used it to rebuke cowardly fear and superstition. In the East they relied upon the soul's gradual emancipation until it should escape into immateriality from the demon that afflicts it with sensation. If the modern poet's imagination appears more overpowered by alarm, by a kind of terror lest the mainsprings of our moral and spiritual activities should give way, we have to consider that the tremendous expansion of the scientific record in these latter days seems to have affected Tennyson like a sentence of inflexible predestination, overshadowing his delight in the world's glories by a foreknowledge of its inevitable doom. The vision which unrolled itself before his imagination, of the blind mechanical evolution of a world "dark with griefs and graves," of human energy squandered on a planet that is passing from fire to frost, evidently fascinated his mind more and more, and possessed it with dismay. That mankind and their works must perish, slowly or suddenly, leaving not a wrack behind, has been the warning of all religions, the foundation of all beliefs in a future life; and the poem of Vastness gives the same warning in the terms of science, but without the same clear note of intrepidity, or of confidence in revealed promises. Yet Tennyson has his antidote to Despair. Amid the general shipwreck of positive creeds, formal theologies, political and philosophic

systems, all of them powerless to affect man's ultimate destiny, we have gleams of spiritual illumination seen on the far-distant horizon; we have a profound faith in the moral direction of cosmic laws, in a spiritual basis of all being, in a kinship and affinity between the spiritual element in man and the divine soul which moves the whole universe. He believes with Coleridge that the world of sense is in some manner the manifestation of supersensual realities. That Love is stronger than Death, and in some form or feeling will survive it, is the idea that was expressed in some of the most musical and melancholy stanzas of "In Memoriam" —

“ Yet if some voice that man could trust
 Should murmur from the narrow house,
 ‘The cheeks drop in; the body bows;
 Man dies: nor is there hope in dust:’

“ Might I not say? ‘ Yet even here,
 But for one hour, O Love, I strive
 To keep so sweet a thing alive :’
 But I should turn mine ears and hear

“ The moanings of the homeless sea,
 The sound of streams that swift or slow
 Draw down Æonian hills, and sow
 The dust of continents to be;

“ And Love would answer with a sigh,
 ‘The sound of that forgetful shore
 Will change my sweetness more and more,
 Half-dead to know that I shall die.’

“ O me, what profits it to put
 An idle case? If Death were seen
 At first as Death, Love had not been,
 Or been in narrowest working shut.”

And in Akbar's Dream,¹ written many years afterward, we have the mystic's invocation of Allah as the Sun of Love —

“ But dimly seen
 Here, till the mortal morning mists of earth
 Fade in the noon of heaven, when creed and race
 Shall bear false witness, each of each, no more,
 But find their limits by the larger light,
 And overstep them, moving easily
 Thro' after-ages in the love of Truth,
 The truth of Love.”

He believes that the deepest human affections are signs and symbols of our participation in something divine.

The Ancient Sage, another poem that appeared toward the close of Tennyson's life, is perhaps the least indefinite exposition of his hopeful philosophy. He touches here upon the conviction, so prevalent in Oriental mysticism, that the entire phantasmagoria of sense perception is essentially deceptive and unsubstantial, an illusion that will vanish with nearer and clearer apprehension of the Divine Presence which sustains the whole system of being —

“ If the Nameless should withdraw from all
 Thy frailty counts most real, all thy world
 Might vanish like thy shadow in the dark.”

We are now in darkness, but larger knowledge may come —

“ And we, the poor earth's dying race, and yet
 No phantoms, watching from a phantom shore
 Await the last and largest sense to make
 The phantom walls of this illusion fade,
 And show us that the world is wholly fair.”

The faint recollections that flit through the brain

¹ 1892.

in childhood are described in lines which have all Tennyson's delicate susceptibility to the lightest impressions of the eye or ear —

“The first gray streak of earliest summer-dawn,
The last long stripe of waning crimson gloom,
As if the late and early were but one —
A height, a broken grange, a grove, a flower
Had murmurs ‘Lost and gone and lost and gone!’
A breath, a whisper — some divine farewell —
Desolate sweetness — far and far away.”

It may be a world of flitting shadows, yet there is work to be done, and light beyond —

“Let be thy wail, and help thy fellow men.”

Amid the scenes of lust and luxury, which chain down the soul —

“Look higher, then — perchance — thou mayest — beyond
A hundred ever-rising mountain lines
And past the range of Night and Shadow — see
The high-heaven dawn of more than mortal day
Strike on the Mount of Vision.”

There is hesitation in the Sage's accents; and the poet can do little more than enjoin us to follow the gleams of light that pierce the clouds which envelop our mortal existence. Science threatens to keep us wandering in an interminable labyrinth. Yet Science may be a symbolical language shadowing forth divine truths, a cypher by which those who have the key may read, in glimpses and occasional rays of light, a message of secret encouragement; and Evolution, a theory of futile transformations in the physical order, may be typical of the upward striving and gradual emancipation of man as a spiritual being. Some such

conclusions as these we can extract and piece together from Tennyson's later meditations ; and if they are not always distinct and coherent, we have to remember that systematic philosophy lies outside the proper range of a poet's art or his mission.

In Tiresias the poet goes back again to antiquity, to the legend of the blind prophet who is in communion with the deities, and who, when Thebes is beleaguered and about to fall, proclaims the Divine decree that one man must devote himself to death for the salvation of his state and people. We have in this story the inveterate belief in the efficacy of human sacrifice that has run through the superstitions of all ages and countries ; it contains the moral idea of self-devotion mixed up with the notion that the angry gods may be appeased by a precious victim ; and the modern poet transfigures the legend into a lofty encomium upon the glory of patriotic martyrdom —

“ My son,
 No sound is breathed so potent to coerce,
 And to conciliate, as their names who dare
 For that sweet mother land which gave them birth
 Nobly to do, nobly to die. Their names,
 Graven on memorial columns, are a song
 Heard in the future ; few, but more than wall
 And rampart, their examples reach a hand
 Far thro' all years, and everywhere they meet
 And kindle generous purpose, and the strength
 To mould it into action pure as theirs.”

It is refreshing, after the dreary visions of a ruined and silent world, of the inutility of all human effort, and of the cold eschatology predicted by Science, to look back again in Tiresias on the ancient world, to a time when men were citizens of a petty state

instead of a vast empire, trained to meet real perils with fortitude and endurance, thinking always of the fortunes of their people, and knowing nothing of the remote destinies of mankind, nor balancing two worlds, the present and the future, against each other. In such conditions of existence their joys and griefs, their fears and hopes, were simple, direct, and confined within a narrow compass. As the idea of progress and the perfectibility of society had little or no hold on them, so they were not deeply discomposed by the knowledge that all things are mutable and transitory. As their minds were neither troubled by the prospect of an immeasurable future for the earth, nor by the discovery of its remote past, so they could concentrate their efforts and aspirations on the ideals which ennoble the present life, on courage, temperance, and justice, on making the best of it by harmonising the inevitable conditions of existence. To the poets and philosophers of antiquity, who knew well that the highest truths lie beyond experience, the rebellious outburst of Despair and the blank dismay of Vastness would have appeared irrational and profoundly inconsistent with the sense of duty and virtue, tending to obliterate the distinctions of good and evil, and to degrade all human society to the level of insects.

From the prison-house of materialism Tennyson himself found release in his firm trust that all things are divinely ordered, and that annihilation is inconceivable; yet his reflections on death are constantly tinged with misgivings. The verses added as an epilogue to Tiresias have the full spontaneous flow in perfect measure, with a sure echoing stroke of the rhymes, that attest consummate workmanship. In the pre-

ude he had greeted his old friend, Edward FitzGerald : and when he wrote these final stanzas he had heard of his death —

“ The tolling of his funeral bell
Broke on my Pagan Paradise.

* * * * *

Gone into darkness, that full light
Of friendship ! past, in sleep, away
By night, into the deeper night !
The deeper night ? A clearer day
Than our poor twilight dawn on earth —
If night, what barren toil to be !
What life, so maim'd by night, were worth
Our living out ? Not mine to me.”

“ The doubtful doom of human kind ” haunts his imagination ; he dwells upon the idea that Song will vanish in the Vast, will end in stillness, and he glances back regretfully at the pagan paradise — at those who

“ Scarce could see, as now we see,
The man in Space and Time,
So drew perhaps a happier lot
Than ours, who rhyme to-day.
The fires that arch this dusky dot —
Yon myriad-worlded way —
The vast sun-clusters' gather'd blaze,
World-isles in lonely skies,
Whole heavens within themselves, amaze
Our brief humanities.”

The conclusion, sooner or later, of the human drama, the finality of all earthly existence — these ideas have been the articles of primary belief in every religion, and belong to the presentiments and expectations that are natural to the human mind, for we are surrounded by decay and death, and the illimitable is an incon-

ceivable idea. But in apocalyptic predictions the earth itself was to be destroyed and disappear with all it contained, was to founder like a ship in mid-ocean, or like a volcanic island sinking suddenly. It is the prospect of this planet, a minute and negligible part of the universe, rolling round in its diurnal course after man and his works have vanished, of inanimate matter surviving with entire unconcern all vital energies, that seems to have oppressed the poet with dejection at the thought of mortal man's utter insignificance. In this mood life lost for him all interest and meaning, except through faith in the perpetuation of the spiritual particle; and his own quotation from Marvell indicates the prevailing bent of his reflections —

“At my back I always hear
Time's winged chariot hurrying near,
And yonder all before us lie
The deserts of eternity.”

To such feelings his poetry gave sublimity and a transcendent range of contemplation; yet it must be remarked that they have a tendency to weigh down the mainsprings of human activity. They are akin to the subtle opiates of Oriental philosophy, which teaches the nothingness of sensuous life; but fortunately the energetic races of the world are not easily discouraged. For it is the inevitability of death that gives a stimulus to life; and strenuous minds draw a motive for exertion, for working while the light lasts, from that very sense of the brevity of human existence and the uncertainty of what may lie beyond, which, although Tennyson fought against it manfully, did undoubtedly haunt his meditations and depress the spirit of his later inspirations. He relied, indeed, upon the sense

of right, of duty, and of trust in the final purpose of a Creator; nevertheless, he seems to have been continually disturbed by the fear lest the scientific forecast of blank desolation for this planet, and the uncertainty of a future conscious existence for mankind, might fatally weaken the power of these high motives to fortify human conduct, and to sustain virtue. Yet in the four volumes of Jowett's *Plato*, which he received from the translator in 1871, he must have found—not only in the dialogues, but also in Jowett's characteristic commentaries—that loftier conception of service in the cause of truth and humanity, which can inspire men to go forward undauntedly, whatever may be their destiny beyond the grave.

In discussing Tennyson's poetry and his intellectual tendencies it has been necessary to disregard chronological sequence and to anticipate, for the purpose of a connected survey. We must now take up again the chronicle of his elder life, which is very slightly marked by events, except when increasing years brought ever-rising fame and public honours. In 1869 he was made an Honorary Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge; and in 1873 Mr. Gladstone proposed a baronetcy, but such promotion had evidently no attraction for him. In 1874 this offer was repeated by Mr. Disraeli (who does not seem to have been aware that it had been already made) in a high-flying sententious letter, evidently attuned to the deeper harmonies of the mysterious relations between genius and government.

“A government should recognize intellect. It elevates and sustains the spirit of a nation. But it is an office not

easy to fulfil; for if it falls into favouritism and the patronage of mediocrity, instead of raising the national sentiment, it might degrade and debase it. Her Majesty, by the advice of Her Ministers, has testified in the Arctic expedition, and will in other forms, her sympathy with science. But it is desirable that the claims of high letters should be equally acknowledged. This is not so easy a matter, because it is in the nature of things that the test of merit cannot be so precise in literature as in science. Nevertheless, etc., etc.”¹

The honour was nevertheless again respectfully declined, with a suggestion, pronounced by authority to be impracticable, that it might be reserved for conferment upon his son after his own death.

Mrs. Tennyson's journal for this time — when they lived alternately between Farringford and Aldworth, making an annual visit to London — is full of interest, recording various sayings and doings, conversation, correspondence, anecdotes, and glimpses of notable visitors — Tourguéneff, Longfellow, Jenny Lind, Huxley, and Gladstone, to the last of whom he read aloud the Holy Grail. At the house of G. H. Lewes he read Guinevere, which made George Eliot weep; and at home he was visited by General Charles Gordon, to whom the poems were a solace and a delight in perilous days at Khartoum. There was a project of bringing about a meeting with Newman, between whom and Tennyson an exchange, or possibly a collision, of philosophic ideas would have been well worth recording; but nothing came of it, and the meeting remains a good subject for an Imaginary Conversation. For Tennyson's table-talk at this period readers must go to the *Memoir*, from which it would be unfair to pick

¹ *Memoir*.

many sayings or anecdotes wherewith to season these pages. He had much of the epigrammatic faculty ; he could condense a criticism into a few words, as when he said that Miss Austen understood the smallness of life to perfection ; he could put colour into it, as when he remarks that poets enrich the blood of the world ; and he could frame a thought, not always in itself very precious, with great felicity. Of amusing anecdotes that struck his fancy, or were collected by his friends to show the wide popularity of his poems, there are many ; for at Farringford he was the cynosure of neighbouring eyes, while he was hunted by tourists abroad, and at home the visitors sat at his feet. He had indeed at this time to pass the ordeal of somewhat unqualified adulation, though one intimate friend, Mrs. Cameron, never failed to speak out her mind. His discourses on poetry, with his favourite quotations, prove a keen discrimination of literary quality, with a mastery of technique that is the gift of a practical artist. Among his quotations may be noticed, as a curiosity, the lines from *Henry VIII.*¹ :—

“To-day, the French,
All clinquant, all in gold, like heathen gods,
Shone down the English ; and, to-morrow, they
Made Britain, India,”

where Shakespeare, in his large manner of illustrating the Oriental glitter of the English array on the Field of the Cloth of Gold, writes as one suddenly possessed by the

“prophetic soul
Of the wide world dreaming on things to come,”

¹ Act i. Scene i.

and falls unconsciously into a vision of the future. For nearly two centuries later it was the contest between France and England in the East that did actually and directly lead to the making of British India.

The diary is a faithful and valuable memorial of English country life at its best toward the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Living quietly with his family, he was in constant intercourse with the most distinguished men of his day, and was himself honoured of them all; a society that gave him all that he desired, and not more than he most undoubtedly deserved.

In 1878 came the marriage of his younger son Lionel to Miss Locker. Seven years afterward, in 1885, they made a journey to India, where Lionel unfortunately caught a fever of which he died on the homeward voyage. Tennyson's verses *To the Marquis of Dufferin and Ava*, always the most largehearted and generous of friends, acknowledge the kindness and unmeasured hospitality which his son received during his illness from the Viceroy of India —

“ But while my life's late eve endures,
Nor settles into hueless gray,
My memories of his briefer day
Will mix with love for you and yours.”

With Carlyle Tennyson remained in constant intercourse personally, and with FitzGerald by letters, except for a short visit to him at Woodbridge in 1876 — “the lonely philosopher, a ‘man of humorous-melancholy-mark,’ with his gray floating locks, sitting among his doves.” They never met again afterwards. It is a

rarity in modern life that two such men as Tennyson and FitzGerald, whose mutual friendship was never shaken, should have met but once in twenty-five years of life, although divided by no longer space than could be traversed by a three hours' railway journey. In FitzGerald's judgment Tennyson reached the grand climacteric of his poetry in the volumes of 1842, for the Idylls, and the later moral and didactic strain of verse, were not to his taste; though in 1873 he wrote to Tennyson, who had sent him Gareth and Lynette, that he admired many passages in the Idylls. It may be true, as is remarked in the *Memoir*, that FitzGerald's sequestered way of life kept him in a critical groove, and that he was crotchety is confessed by himself. Nevertheless, in the unanimous chorus of applause from all the illustrious men of that time, the dissentient voice of the scholarly recluse, always admiring and affectionate, was worth listening to; and many may question whether the settled opinion of a later generation will find much fault with it.

CHAPTER VI

THE PLAYS

WHEN Tennyson, in 1875, brought out his play of Queen Mary, he made his entry upon a field into which no first-class English poet had ventured for a long time previously. Coleridge's play of Remorse had a fair run, because it was written down to the level of popular taste ; and his poetic genius had little to do with its success. Shelley and Byron wrote dramatic poetry, and Shelley believed that *The Cenci* was well fitted for the stage, but it never appeared on the boards, although the figure of Beatrice is undoubtedly drawn with great tragic power. Byron openly declared that his dramas were not written with the slightest view to the stage ; and, in short, we must go back to Goldsmith for a poet who was also a successful playwright. None of these poets had taken their plots or characters from English history ; so that there was novelty in Tennyson's design of continuing the line of Shakespeare's English chronicle-plays by dramatising great periods of our history. In France the historic drama came in for a few years with Victor Hugo and the romanticists ; yet it may be affirmed that no French dramatist of the first order has ever founded a play on the annals of France ; and we may suppose that the classic taste and style, which rejects details and local colouring, dealing in noble sentiments rhetori-

cally delivered, had discouraged and thrown out of fashion any attempt to exhibit on the stage famous national events and personages, surrounding them with the variety of character and circumstance that belong to real life. Mrs. Tennyson notes in her diary for April 1874 that her husband had thought of William the Silent as the subject for a play ; but had said that our own history was so great, and that he liked English subjects and knew most about them, so that he had begun *Queen Mary*.

From the point of view taken in the foregoing observations, therefore, we have a new departure in this play, which introduces us to that most critical epoch in the history of the English people, when violent religious changes, a doubtful succession to the crown, and foreign marriages had spread terror, suspicion, and discord throughout England and Scotland, producing that fermentation of conspiracies, rebellions, and persecutions which is generated by a mixture of religion and politics at a high temperature. The cardinal point of the situation was that in the middle of the sixteenth century the successions to both the English and Scottish crowns had fallen to daughters ; and that this had occurred almost simultaneously with the culmination of the great revolt against the Papacy, with the fierce religious wars in western Europe, and with the contest between France and Spain for ascendancy. The Emperor Charles V. married his son to Mary Tudor of England in order to secure an English alliance. As a counter move, Henry II. of France married the Dauphin to Mary Stuart of Scotland ; and so the two Catholic queens, representing antagonistic politics, were ruling two kingdoms, in both of which

a powerful party of nobles, with strong popular support, were stubborn adherents of the Reformation.

“ Mary of Scotland, married to your Dauphin,
Would make our England, France ;
Mary of England, joining hands with Spain,
Would be too strong for France.”¹

No more arduous or complicated position, sure to develop character, has fallen to the lot of women than that of either Queen. Mary Stuart's life and death were infinitely the more romantic and pitiful ; a beautiful frail woman swept onward as if by Fate to death on the scaffold, a sacrifice to implacable policy, fulfils the highest conditions of a tragic drama. Shakespeare might have written it, if she had not been so nearly of his own time. On the other hand, there is no romance, no play of wild passion, no fateful catastrophe, in the life of Mary Tudor ; she had a touch of her father's courage, but also of his cruelty ; she was a dull woman with no feminine charm ; her reign was one long failure ; and she left the grand part in history to be taken up and played royally by her sister Elizabeth. One might therefore say that Tennyson, in fixing upon Queen Mary and her reign, had chosen a difficult subject for the theatre, since the leading character is neither heroic nor intensely pathetic ; she was a miserable disappointed woman whose name has an indelible stain of blood upon it. Nevertheless Tennyson's play is a dramatic reading of authentic history, executed with much animation and with imaginative force in the presentation of character. Although the interest in the story belongs rather to the events and circum-

¹ Act I. Scene v.

stances than to the persons, yet the poet fills in skilfully the historic outlines; he gives elevation to the speeches and sentiments; he realises for us the motives and actions of men and women who paid forfeit for a lost cause at the stake or on the scaffold; he exhibits lively pictures of the court and the street. He contrives to invest Mary with some dignity, and to extract from us some scanty sympathy with her unhappiness; though it is impossible to make of her the central figure on which the eyes of an audience should be riveted as the action proceeds. The main interest is rather political than personal. Cranmer, Gardiner, Wyatt, White the Lord Mayor, Paget and Pole, Noailles and Renard, pass over the stage and discharge their historical parts in speeches full of concise and characteristic expression; but to bring all these parts into dramatic unity, and to make an imaginative plot out of a page of familiar history, was probably beyond the power even of first-rate genius. Tennyson himself perceived that the older chronicles, which preserved only the striking features of the time, allowed greater scope to the creative faculty than a precise knowledge of men and events which binds a poet down to the facts, for the necessity of being accurate impairs the illusion; and the historical dramatist finds himself more at ease in a distant half-known age, or anywhere else than in his own country. Mary Stuart and Mary Tudor have been brought on the stage by foreigners, Schiller and Victor Hugo, in the latter case with indifferent success. Moreover, although broad colours and circumstantial details give the scenes a realistic impressiveness, they rather detract from the universality so to speak, which is the attribute of a

great drama. Shakespeare's finest plays are independent of and disregard such accessories.

Nevertheless the portrait painting, under these inevitable limitations, is very well done, and it illuminates an eventful period. The priests, statesmen, and martyrs of Mary's short and troubled reign stand out in clear relief; the strong light thrown upon their figures discloses the intrigues and clashing politics of a time when the balance seemed to hang even between the old faith and the new, just when the Spanish marriage was adding a heavy weight to the side of Rome. Paget, Howard, Wyatt, and Bagenhall represent the Englishman of that day for whom religion was a question of politics. Pole, Bonner, and Gardiner are the ecclesiastics for whom political power was an instrument for the enforcement of religious conformity. Mary and Elizabeth are the royal impersonations of the two parties, both princesses of the Tudor blood, with the inherited courage that rises to emergencies; but Mary has the foreign strain of bigotry, while Elizabeth, a full Englishwoman, has an instinctive understanding of and fellow-feeling with the real temper of her countrymen. On the whole Tennyson does Mary more than justice; for he uses the license of a dramatist to endow her with much more energy of speech and action than she can really have possessed, and to impart a fierce glow to her gloomy fanaticism.

Mary :

O God! I have been too slack, too slack;
 There are Hot Gospellers even among our guards—
 Nobles we dared not touch. We have but burnt
 The heretic priest, workmen, and women and children,
 Wet, famine, ague, fever, storm, wreck, wrath,—

We have so play'd the coward ; but by God's grace,
 We'll follow Philip's leading, and set up
 The Holy Office here — garner the wheat,
 And burn the tares with unquenchable fire.¹

Cecil's brief reflections, after conversing with Elizabeth, mark the contrast —

“ Much it is
 To be nor mad, nor bigot — have a mind —
 Not let Priests' talk, or dream of worlds to be,
 Miscolour things about her — sudden touches
 For him, or him — sunk rocks ; no passionate faith —
 But — if let be — balance and compromise ;
 Brave, wary, sane to the heart of her — a Tudor
 School'd by the shadow of death — a Boleyn, too,
 Glancing across the Tudor — not so well.”²

The passage is a model of laconic expression, indicating rapid and concentrated thought. In the general diction of this play the absence of ornament is remarkable ; the poet has put a curb on his fancy, and has stripped his English for the encounter of keen wits occupied in affairs of State ; the priests, politicians, and soldiers waste no words. Yet we have here and there familiar touches of the picturesque, as in Wyatt's reference to his father —

Wyatt :

Courtier of many courts, he loved the more
 His own gray towers, plain life and letter'd peace,
 To read and rhyme in solitary fields,
 The lark above, the nightingale below,
 And answer them in song.³

Also in the rendering of that well-known story of Wyatt reconnoitring the breach in London Bridge,

¹ Act v. Scene v.

² *Ibid.*

³ Act. II. Scene i.

whereby he was cut off from the city, was forced to march round by Kingston, and failed in his enterprise—

“ Last night I climb'd into the gate-house, Brett,
And scared the gray old porter and his wife.
And then I crept along the gloom and saw
They had hewn the drawbridge down into the river.
It roll'd as black as death ; and that same tide
Which, coming with our coming, seem'd to smile
And sparkle like our fortune as thou saidst,
Ran sunless down, and moaned against the piers.”¹

The play of “ Harold,” which followed next in the “ historical trilogy,”² takes us back to a period when history is still blended with romance; so that the dramatist could let loose the reins of his imagination, and could fashion his characters at pleasure within the broad outlines of tradition. He has thus escaped from the bonds of exactitude; he can be more poetic; he can even avail himself of the privilege, which is legitimate when used moderately, of giving a turn of modern sentiment to the language of personages belonging to a distant century. Yet Tennyson has nowhere in this play done violence to historic probabilities in his delineation of character and situation; he takes the main incidents, such as the detention of Harold in Normandy until he had solemnly sworn to acknowledge and assist William's claim to the English crown, the death of Edward the Confessor, the battles of Stamford Bridge and Senlac, and composes them into dramatic scenes as an artist might paint pictures of them. The dialogue between Harold and his brother Wulfnoth, when both are prisoners of the Norman at Bayeux, and when Wulfnoth is imploring

¹ Act II. Scene iii.

² Mary, Harold, Becket. *Memoir*, vol. ii. p. 173.

Harold to obtain their liberty by swearing fealty to William, has striking and finely versified passages; the pressure of conflicting feelings is well rendered. Will Harold yield and set them free for the sake of Edith whom he loves? He is touched deeply. Or for the sake of England?

Harold : Deeper still.

Wulfnoth :

And deeper still the deep-down oubliette,
 Down thirty feet below the smiling day —
 In blackness — dogs' food thrown upon thy head.
 And over thee the suns arise and set,
 And the lark sings, the sweet stars come and go,
 And men are at their markets, in their fields,
 And woo their loves and have forgotten thee;
 And thou art upright in thy living grave,
 Where there is barely room to shift thy side.¹

In this passage, as generally throughout the play, the metrical execution is superior to that of Queen Mary. The whole piece, indeed, is written on a higher poetic level; the language of the dialogues and speeches has a certain grandeur that was inadmissible in the mouths of the sixteenth-century notables, who were obliged to speak by the book; and the portrait of a noble warrior and patriot king is romantically enlarged out of the dim records of an unlettered age. In the final Act we have Harold going forth to the battle, the meeting of the armies, and Edith with the Saxon bishop watching the sway of a well-matched contest, until Harold falls: the intense excitement of the situation is powerfully suggested. The visions that pass through Harold's dream as he sleeps in his tent on the night

¹ Act II. Scene ii.

before Senlac, have an obvious precedent in Shakespeare's Richard III.; nor is the chant of the monks during the fight quite an original dramatic invention, yet they are both skilfully adapted to enhance the impression of the crisis. But the concluding speech of William the Conqueror over the bodies of Harold and his mistress, Edith, is somewhat marred by the introduction of a moral sentiment that sounds too much out of character with the time —

William : Leave them. Let them be !
 Bury him and his paramour together.
 He that was false in oath to me, it seems
 Was false to his own wife. We will not give him
 A Christian burial.

And possibly Tennyson did not at the moment recollect that William's mother had been just such another paramour as Edith.

It will have been noticed that the Trilogy takes no account of chronological order. If, at any rate, the play of Becket, which appeared last in the series, being published in 1884, had preceded Queen Mary, we should have seen the first beginning, under the Plantagenets, of the quarrel between Rome and the English State which came to a final breach under the Tudors. The *Memoir* inserts a declaration of the late Mr. J. R. Green, no light authority, that all his researches into the annals of the twelfth century had not given him so vivid a conception of the character of Henry II. and his Court as was embodied in Tennyson's Becket. Whether this is a superior quality in historic plays, may be open to argument; and at any rate one may demur respectfully to the rule laid down in a letter written on this

play to its author by Mr. Bryce, that "truth in history is naturally truth in poetry."¹ For accuracy of reproduction, though it gratifies the realistic demands of the present time, and gives pleasure to the cultivated reader, must have a tendency to cramp the imaginative freedom that wings the flight of dramatic genius; and some historical plays and romances of the first order abound with inaccuracies. Nevertheless the rule may be applicable to delineation of character; and in his two principal personages, Henry II. and Becket, Tennyson has embroidered upon the historic canvas with force and fidelity. The subject lends itself to dramatic composition by providing for the leading personage an ecclesiastical hero, the Archbishop, who overtops all the others, marking the central line of interest throughout; and whose violent death in the cause that he impersonates supplies a fitly tragic ending to the play. Then, also, the story of Rosamond and Eleanor provides just the romantic element of secret love and feminine vindictiveness that is needed to soften and vary the harsh disputing, the interchange of threats and curses, between priests and barons; and to Tennyson's skill in seizing and working upon these points of vantage we may attribute largely the success of this piece upon the stage. The language, as in *Queen Mary*, is sonorous and masculine, the dialogues are pointed in thrust and parry; and one or two important speeches have a stately tone well suited to their occasion.

Henry :

Barons and bishops of our realm of England,
 After the nineteen winters of King Stephen —
 A reign which was no reign, when none could sit
 By his own hearth in peace; when murder, common

¹ *Memoir.*

As nature's death, like Egypt's plague, had filled
 All things with blood, when every doorway blushed,
 Dashed red with that unhallowed passover ;
 When every baron ground his blade in blood ;
 The household dough was kneaded up in blood ;
 The mill-wheel turned in blood, the wholesome plow
 Lay rusting in the furrow's yellow weeds,
 Till famine dwarft the race — I came, your king.¹

In the scene where Queen Eleanor has tracked Rosamond through the labyrinth to her bower, threatens to kill her, and offers life to her on base terms, Rosamond, after kneeling for mercy, at last turns upon the Queen and replies in the right tragic spirit —

Rosamond : I am a Clifford,
 My son a Clifford and Plantagenet,
 I am to die then. . . .

 Both of us will die.
 And I will fly with my sweet boy to heaven,
 And shriek to all the saints among the stars :
 Eleanor of Aquitaine, Eleanor of England !
 Murdered by that adulteress Eleanor,
 Whose doings are a horror to the east,
 A hissing in the west.²

It is a play that won not only the cordial commendation of scholars and men of letters, but also popular applause, and the foremost of our English theatrical artists willingly joined in giving it adequate representation; with the result that it held the stage beyond fifty nights, and Sir Henry Irving has said that Becket is one of the three successful plays produced by him at the Lyceum. The common remark that Tennyson was no born dramatist cannot be gainsaid; he was essentially a lyrical poet; and the lyric vein, being

¹ Act I. Scene iii.

² Act IV. Scene ii.

different in kind and charged with self-consciousness, has to be suppressed or carefully controlled in dramatic composition, which must be entirely objective and impersonal. This necessity manifestly presses with peculiar weight upon the writer of plays that are intended to be illustrations of authentic history, where the limits of character-probability have to be observed; for the dramatist could not put fanciful ideas of his own into the mouth of Philip of Spain or Cranmer, and must curtail his lyrical exuberance. We may therefore admire the versatility of Tennyson's powers in the restraint which he placed upon his natural propensity; his plays are not poems in his own manner arranged dramatically, like Mr. Swinburne's *Bothwell*; nor are they romances cut up into dialogue; they are severe and strenuous presentations of real people and well-known events. This may be counted both as praise and dispraise; for somehow a drama that is closely tied to facts lacks universal interest; it cannot rise far above the ground, nor attain the heights that secure for it a permanent place in the national literature. Yet if Tennyson has not succeeded in the arduous and probably hopeless enterprise of reviving the historical drama, he deserves credit and sympathy for attempting it; and he has set an example, which is being followed in the romantic drama by a younger poet of his school in the present day,¹ of endeavouring to stem the downward current of deterioration in the taste of the playgoing public, by offering them plays of fine artistic quality and form, dealing seriously with momentous events and deep emotions, at a time when the national theatre is more and more reduced to

¹ Mr. Stephen Phillips.

ringing changes upon the trivial and commonplace situations of ordinary society.

The *Promise of May* takes very different ground. It was written somewhat unwillingly (we are told in the *Memoir*) "at the importunate entreaty of a friend who had urged Tennyson to try his hand on a modern village tragedy." This is a pastoral play, on a well-worn theme — the ruin of a farmer's pretty daughter, who has been captivated by the superior manners and pretentious talk of a young man belonging to the class of gentlefolk. When he appears on the stage with a book in his hand, we know from his first words what is coming; we can see that Tennyson is fetching another blow at the idol of materialism —

(*Enter Edgar, reading*) :

This author, with his charm of simple style
 And close dialectic, all but proving man
 An automatic series of sensations,
 Has often numbed me into apathy
 Against the unpleasant jolts of this rough road,
 That breaks off short into the abysses — made me
 A quietest, taking all things easily.

The conviction, which throughout haunted Tennyson, that in default of a clear and certain prospect of immortality a man's soul may be lost utterly, that he must sink into sensuality, and cannot indeed be much blamed for it logically, is the moral exemplified in this play. It comes out in Edgar's excuse for seducing and deserting the girl —

Edgar : What can a man then live for but sensations,
 Pleasant ones? Men of old could undergo
 Unpleasant for the sake of pleasant ones
 Hereafter, like the Moslem beauties waiting

To clasp their lovers by the golden gates.
For me, whose cheerless Houris after death
Are Night and Silence, pleasant ones — the while,
If possible, here, to crop the flower and pass.

Farmer Dobson : Well, I never 'eard the likes of that afoor.

Nor has any one else, in a London theatre. We have here the recurrent idea that scientific knowledge saps and destroys the basis of morality, and lets loose all the unruly affections of sinful men. Marriage is to Edgar an obsolete tradition —

Edgar : When the man,
The child of evolution, flings aside
His swaddling bands, the morals of his tribe,
He, following his own instincts as his God,
Will enter on the larger golden age ;
No pleasure there tabooed.

This is scarcely a persuasive way of wooing a simple sweetheart, and Eva, the farmer's daughter, is naturally puzzled, while Dobson, Edgar's rival, is mortally suspicious of him ; and at the end the materialist turns out a double-dyed villain, who gets off much too cheaply. The didactic strain is evidently out of place in a pastoral, save for the occasionally comic effect of an evolutionist discoursing among bamboozled farmers and ploughmen — an incongruous figure, brought in to be battered. And the thread that holds together the action and the personages is too slight. But the rural scenery and the talk of the peasantry bring out Tennyson's genuine knowledge of country life, and this part of the dialogues is, as in all Tennyson's plays, alert and amusing. On its first night the piece was received in a contentious spirit by the audience at The Globe, chiefly, as the

Memoir mentions, because it had been advertised as an attack against Socialism ; “ the public had mistaken its purpose.” Yet although an experienced playwright declared at the time that he could have made it a signal success, it is difficult to believe that a travesty of moral philosophy (and, to be theatrically popular, it *must* be travestied) could ever have helped to sustain Tennyson’s reputation as a dramatic author.

The other minor plays of Tennyson are of a different and brighter cast. In December 1879 *The Falcon* was produced at the St. James’s theatre, and held the stage sixty-seven nights ; it is a mediæval love story belonging to the class of ingenious *fabliaux*, told in the Decameron of Boccaccio, afterwards used by La Fontaine, and lastly arranged by Tennyson as a metrical drama in one scene. Fanny Kemble likened it to one of A. de Musset’s light pieces, though it has not his sparkling wit. A lady makes a sudden visit to the knight who has been vainly wooing her. He must offer her some refreshment, so he is forced to kill his favourite falcon to provide a solitary dish ; but she had come to demand of him for her son this very bird ; and he has to confess that she has eaten¹ it. Such a sacrifice to love so touches the lady’s heart that she marries him. *The Cup*, on the other hand, is in a graver vein, expanded from a story by Plutarch of a Galatian lady in the time of the Roman republic, who escapes a forced marriage by poisoning herself and a Galatian noble, Synorix, the traitor to his country, who had joined the conquering Romans and

¹ “ Hélas, reprit l’amant infortuné,
L’Oiseau n’est plus, vous en avez diné.”

(*La Fontaine.*)

had murdered her husband. The political situation of a province just subdued by the Republic forms a good background to the action and gives it verisimilitude, for the story rings true as an incident that might well have happened in the circumstances. The characters are lightly yet distinctly set, with the strong emotions poetically expressed; and when we learn that Irving with the best English actress took the leading parts, with magnificently decorative scenery, it is easy to understand why *The Cup* had the longest run in England of all Tennyson's dramatic pieces.

Last of all, *The Foresters* was brought out on the New York stage in 1892, when it received a hearty welcome from the Americans, for whom this reminiscence of early English woods and wolds may have come like a breath of fresh air to their crowded rectangular streets. This play has the advantage of keeping well outside authentic history; for though Tennyson wrote of it that he had "sketched the state of the people in another great transition period of the making of England," he has luckily done nothing of the kind, but has given us the famous figures of popular tradition, handed down by the minstrels and rhymers, in a new and lively dress. Undoubtedly these legends reflect the feelings and sympathies of the English people at a time when the great midland forests sheltered bands of daring men, who defied the Norman law and kept up a sort of guerilla against the foreign yoke; and this is an atmosphere much more favourable to a romantic woodland drama than the climate of history. The introduction of Titania with her fairies (suggested, probably for scenic effect, by Irving) is a somewhat temerarious device, not only for

the obvious reason that they have been created once for all by a master-hand, but also because the pure magical touch was not in Tennyson; nor was his verse light enough for fantastic spriteliness, or his playfulness sufficiently volatile.

Titania : I, Titania, bid you flit,
And you dare to call me Tit.

First Fairy : Tit for love of brevity,
Not for love of levity.

Titania : Pertest of our flickering mob
Wouldst thou call my Oberon Ob ?

Moreover, Thomas Love Peacock's Maid Marian, with its exquisite snatches of song and ballad, and the richer humour of its dialogue, had already traversed the same ground in prose. But at the end of *The Foresters* Tennyson's special qualities of picturesque suggestion and reverie come out in the dreamy melodious lines that drop the curtain on a vision of primitive romance.

Marian : And yet I think these oaks at dawn and even
Will whisper evermore of Robin Hood ;
We leave but happy memories in the forest.

* * * * *

You, good friar,
You Much, you Scarlet, you dear Little John,
Your names will cling like ivy to the wood.
And here, perhaps, a hundred years away,
Some hunter in day dreams or half asleep
Will hear our arrows whizzing overhead,
And catch the winding of a phantom horn.

CHAPTER VII

THE LAST YEARS AND LATEST POETRY: CONCLUSION

IN 1883 a peerage was offered by the Queen to Tennyson, who after some hesitation consented, under Gladstone's advice, to accept it. He took his seat, the first representative in the House of Lords of a purely literary qualification, in 1884; and in the same year he voted for the Franchise Bill, having stipulated with Gladstone and obtained a pledge that a Bill for the redistribution of constituencies should follow. The measure he held to be just and necessary, though Gladstone received from him a verse of warning against setting the troubled waters of politics toward a precipitate channel. Their views upon public affairs soon afterward fell more and more asunder; and we find Tennyson writing that he loved Gladstone, but hated his Irish policy; while the poet's natural distrust of "rash innovators" shows itself repeatedly in all his discourse upon the constitutional questions of this time.

The years of his declining life were passed between his two country houses, with excursions into the country, visits to London, and occasional cruises in a friend's yacht. He received old friends and privileged guests with kindly hospitality; talked on politics, religion, and poetry; spoke of men whom he had

known, scenes that he remembered, and books that he had read; received letters out of all lands, and replied to some of them with epigrammatic brevity. He was still occupied with the leisurely composition of his later poems.

From 1885 Tennyson had published, at intervals, three small volumes of poems, beside *Locksley Hall Sixty Years After*. One line in this poem its author held to be the best of the kind that he had ever written —

“ Universal Ocean softly washing all her warless isles,”

though it is full of the sibilants that vex all English verse-makers; and the suggestion that the sea would become calm when the land should be at peace may be thought logically perplexing. It was but seasonable that Tennyson's latest poetry should have been tinged with autumnal hues. The range of his mind had been widened by constant assimilation with the expansion of scientific knowledge, and by long experience of the world; but as far horizons often produce a vague sadness, so his retrospective views of life, as he turns back and surveys it, are melancholy. In poetry and in prose the sequel to a fine original piece, written after a long interval, has very rarely, if ever, been successful; though the second part is often valuable to the biographer by illustrating the alterations of style and thought that follow naturally the course of years. Tennyson himself said that “the two *Locksley Halls* were likely to be in the future two of the most historically interesting of his poems, as descriptive of the tone of the age at two distant periods of his life.” But it may be questioned whether the interest is not

rather biographical than historical, whether, in fact, the change of tone was not in the age, but in Tennyson himself. For there can be no doubt that the interval of sixty years, over which the aged squire in the second poem looks back so mournfully, was for the English people a period of active and eager enterprise, of social betterment and national prosperity. The grave forebodings of the poem, the sense of dismay at the ills of mortality, reflect the mood of the poet, not of the people. He would probably have replied that the poem was a dramatic representation of old age, and he disclaimed any identity with the portraits of his imagination; but it is impossible for an author to insist positively on his entire personal detachment from his poetic impersonations of thought and character. The choice of subject and its treatment mark unmistakably the dominant ideas; nor can an essentially lyrical poet give fervid expression to any feelings but his own.

On the whole, it must be admitted that the two last volumes fall below the level of his verse at its prime; nor could one expect or desire that after threescore years and ten a poet's age should not affect the force and fertility of his writing and his general outlook on life. Some of these late poems are overweighted with thought, the diction is too emphatic, the colour of his meditations takes a more sombre tinge than heretofore, and a certain cloudiness gathers over his loftier utterances. Yet in *Demeter* and *Persephone* we have still the delicate handling, the self-restraint, the severe air of his earlier compositions. The ancient allegory of the Earth goddess, the figure of Nature in flower and in decay, of the disappearance and return of the

harvest, is finely enlarged into the moral conception of light eventually conquering darkness, of Heaven finally prevailing over the sunless halls of Hades. The lines subjoined are full of his old picturesque charm —

“ Once more the reaper in the gleam of dawn
 Will see me by the landmark far away
 Blessing his field, or seated in the dusk
 Of even, by the lonely threshing-floor,
 Rejoicing in the Harvest and the grange.”

And one well-known passage seems to connect, by a simile, Demeter's vision of her daughter with telepathic intimations — one of those obscure psychical phenomena which have recently come within the scope of scientific research —

“ Last, as the likeness of a dying man,
 Without his knowledge, flits from him to warn
 A far-off friendship that he comes no more.”

The passing of such shadows over the brain is well known to be an old and perplexing experience; and Crabbe, who collected the legends of the seashore, alludes to such a visitation in one of his Tales.

Of Tiresias some mention has already been made. Possibly the miscellaneous character of these pieces may be thought to do some damage to their collective impressiveness, by suggesting that stray leaves may have been collected and appended to the principal poem in each volume. “Owd Roa,” a story of a dog, told in Lincolnshire dialect that cannot be understood without a glossary, becomes wearisome in more than sixty stanzas; the more so because, being placed in the latest complete edition between Demeter and Vastness,

it finds the reader unprepared for such abrupt alternations of style and subject. No one, as has been said, would count it unnatural or unbecoming that in many of these poems the shade which perpetually hung over Tennyson's brooding mind should have become darker in the late evening of his days. His sympathy with human unhappiness repeatedly shows itself in such pieces as *Forlorn*, *The Leper's Bride*, *Romney's Remorse*, *The Ring*, *The Bandit's Death*, — all of which exhibit the sorrowful sides of life, and illustrate patience in suffering, repentance, or, in one instance, revenge. In the poem of *Forlorn*, where a mother adjures her daughter not to marry without confessing to her lover a long-past frailty, the tone is too vehement; and the same subject has been more emotionally handled in one of George Meredith's earliest poems, *Margaret's Bridal Eve*; where the mother disregards moral scruples, and takes the more natural part of urging the girl to conceal her fault; but she confesses, is renounced by the lover, and dies. Of the two versions one must prefer that of Meredith, who strikes a superior keynote, and creates the right tragic situation by throwing the strain of conscience and the merit of self-sacrifice entirely upon the daughter.

The same gloominess of atmosphere overhangs *The Death of CEnone*. The beautiful mountain-nymph of Tennyson's youth, passionately lamenting her desertion upon Mount Ida, has now become soured and vindictive; she is a resentful wife to whom Paris, dying from the poisoned arrow, crawls "lame, crooked, reeling, livid, through the mist," imploring her to heal him. CEnone spurns him as an adulterer who may "go back to his adulteress and die"; yet at his death

she throws herself into the flames of his pyre. Tennyson said that he considered this poem even more strictly classical in form and language than the old *Ænone*. To some of us, nevertheless, it may seem that its tone of stern reprobation jars with the style and feeling of antique Hellenic tradition. The story is taken from a short passage in a late Greek writer;¹ and we may remember that in Homer the adulteress Helen is found living happily and honourably after the war with her husband in Sparta. And Tennyson's propensity to enforce grave moral lessons has led him to lay the lash so heavily on Paris as to disparage *Ænone* and provoke compassion for the sinner.

The spirituality of the East, whence all great religions of the world have originated, had a strong attraction for his meditative temperament; but he never threw its deeper philosophy into concrete form, though he sketched the beginning of a poem upon Ormuzd and Ahriman, the Manichæan spirits of good and evil. Akbar's Dream, the single study made by Tennyson of an authentic Asiatic figure, does indeed embody the lofty ideal of an eclectic Faith transcending formalism, sectarian intolerance, and the idols of the crowd, and seeking for some spacious theology that shall comprehend the inner significance and aspirations of all external worships. Akbar, however, was not, could not be, a great spiritual leader of men; he was a large-minded politic emperor ruling over manifold races and conflicting creeds; and he himself foresaw that his eclectic system could not take root or endure. This general conception of his character and position is drawn in grand outline, though the subject is too

¹ Apollodorus.

large for so short a poem; and the concluding Hymn to the Sun is a majestic song of praise—

“Adoring Him the Timeless in the flame that measures Time.”

The last poem that Tennyson finished was *The Dreamer*, who hears in his sleep the wail of the Earth rolling through space, the mournful music of a sphere oppressed by the burden of the sins and misfortunes of the race whom it is bearing along, helpless and unwilling, to an uncertain destiny. The poet endeavours to cheer our disconsolate planet by the assurance that

“All’s well that ends well,
Whirl and follow the Sun,”

which may be understood allegorically as of hope in the Light that leads.

The *Death of Ænone* and *Akbar’s Dream*, with other minor pieces, are in the volume which closed, in 1892, the long series of poems that had held two generations under their charm. Throughout that period, almost equal in length to Queen Victoria’s reign, Tennyson maintained his foremost place among the Victorian poets; and although one can mark the slow decline of a genius that had reached its zenith fifty years before death extinguished it, yet hardly any English poet has so long retained power, or has published so little that might have been omitted with benefit to his permanent reputation. Nor will it ever be forgotten that in his eighty-first year he wrote *Crossing the Bar*, where the noiseless indraw of the ebb-tide from the land back into the ocean is a magnificent image of the soul’s quiet parting from life on earth and its absorption into the vastness of infinity.

It is apparent from the *Memoir*, at any rate, that the weight of more than fourscore years depressed none of Tennyson's interest in literature and art, in political and philosophic questions; nor did it slacken his enjoyment of humorous observation or anecdote. Among many recollections he told of Hallam (the historian) saying to him, "I have lived to read Carlyle's *French Revolution*, but I cannot get on with it, the style is so abominable"; and of Carlyle groaning over Hallam's *Constitutional History*, "Eh, it's a miserable skeleton of a book" — which brings out into summary comparison two opposite schools of history-writing, the picturesque and the precise. He praised Carlyle's honesty, but said that he knew nothing about poetry or art. He told how the sage of Chelsea once came to smoke a pipe with him one evening in London, when the talk turned upon the immortality of the soul, and Carlyle said, "Eh, old Jewish rags, you must clear your mind of all that," and likened man's sojourn on earth to a traveller's rest at an inn; whereupon Tennyson rejoined that the traveller knew whither he was bound, and where he should sleep on the night following. FitzGerald, who was present, might have quoted to them his own stanza from Omar Khayyam, which gives the true inner meaning of the famous parable of the dervish who insisted on taking up his quarters in the king's palace, which he declared to be nothing more than a caravanserai.¹

Robert Browning's death in December 1889 dis-

¹ "'Tis but a tent where takes his one day's rest
A Sultan to the realm of Death address;
The Sultan rises, and the dark Ferrash
Strikes, and prepares it for another guest."

tressed him acutely ; it was a forewarning to the elder of two brothers in verse for whom posterity must decide whether they are to be equals in renown. "A great thinker in verse," Tennyson said of him ; and again, "He has plenty of music in him, but cannot get it out ; he has intellect enough for a dozen of us, but he has not got the glory of words." Their distinctive styles and qualities are so well marked that each poet sets the other in relief ; and the generation that had two such interpreters is singularly fortunate. In the junior poets of his later day he took a sympathetic interest. He wrote kindly to Rudyard Kipling, whose patriotic verse pleased him, and to William Watson, who twelve months later paid a grateful tribute to his memory in one of the best among many threnodies.

His last residence at Farringford was in the spring and early summer of 1892, when he made a yachting voyage to the Channel Islands ; and by the autumn he was at Aldworth in Surrey. Lord Selborne and the Master of Balliol visited him, but he told Jowett that he was not strong enough for the usual discussions between them on religion and philosophy. Jowett answered, "Your poetry has an element of philosophy more to be considered than any regular philosophy in England," which might be interpreted as an ambiguous and possibly not an extravagant compliment.

The final chapter of the *Memoir* gives briefly some of his latest sayings, and describes a peaceful and noble ending. He found his Christianity undisturbed by contentious sects and creeds, but, he said, "I dread the losing of forms ; I have expressed this in my *Akbar*." When, at the end of September 1892, he fell seriously ill, and Sir Andrew Clarke arrived, the

physician and his patient fell to discussing Gray's *Elegy*; and a few days later, although he had become much worse, he sent for his Shakespeare, but he was obliged to let his son read to him. Next day he said, "I want the blinds up; I want to see the sky and the light." It was a glorious morning, and the warm sunshine was flooding the Sussex weald and the line of the South Downs, which he could see from his window. He lay with his hand resting on his Shakespeare, unable to read; and after midnight on the 6th October he passed away very quietly. The funeral service in Westminster Abbey, with its two anthems—*Crossing the Bar* and *The Silent Voices*—filling the long-drawn aisles and rising to the fretted vault above the heads of a great congregation, will long be remembered by those who were present. His pleasant and prosperous life had been varied by few griefs or troubles; he had attained signal success in the high calling that he had set before himself; he had won honour and fame among all English-speaking peoples, and he departed at the coming of the time when no man can work.

A comparison of Tennyson with Browning has already been touched upon. Browning's obscurity, when he was engaged upon his minute mental anatomy, his manner of leaving his thoughts rough-hewn, are points of contrast with Tennyson's clear and chiselled phrasing; we have less light as we go deeper. The truth is that Browning's psychologic studies are too diffuse and discursive for the compact and vivid treatment that is essential to poetry. And the peculiarity of his genius—the strain and hard

service that he imposed upon the English tongue — place him to some extent outside the right apostolic succession, in its direct line, of our national poets, of those who have enlarged the capacity of our language for imaginative and musical expression, without subjecting the instrument to rough usage. Among these Tennyson may certainly be counted. To lay stress upon the metrical variety of his poems, upon his experiments in classical prosody, or upon his development of the resources of the language for harmony, would be to repeat what has been frequently said by others. It may be questioned whether he could give his rhythm the swift movement, as of a thoroughbred racer on turf, that is produced by Mr. Swinburne in some of his most elaborate compositions, where the accent and the quantity fall together; nor had he the resonant organ-notes of Milton when he was playing a symphony upon the open vowels. Yet his power of smoothing down linguistic harshness and difficulties was remarkable; and his skill in the arrangement of words to connote physical sensations has been already mentioned. His command over the long, flowing line, which no poet before him had used so frequently, gave it the flexibility that served him well in such pieces as *The Northern Farmer*, where the broad dialect required free play; while in other poems he could give this metre the sounding roll of a chant or a chorus. On the instrumental resources of blank verse we know that he set the highest value. "Blank verse," he said once, "can be the finest mode of expression in our language"; he had his own secrets of arranging and diversifying it; and all the latest composers in this essentially English metre have

profited by his lessons. But for a thorough analysis of Tennyson's management of blank verse, in comparison with the other masters of the art, the student must again be referred to Mr. J. B. Mayor's "Chapters on English Metre," where the styles of Tennyson and Browning, as representatives of modern English versification, are critically examined.

It will have been seen that some attempt has been made in these pages to combine a short biography of Tennyson with a running commentary on his poems, as they illustrate his intellectual habit and the circumstances of his life. And to some extent the result accords with Taine's generalising treatment of literature as a bundle of documents that reveal and record the conditions, social and climatic, moral and material, in which it was produced, and thus elucidate history. Yet in the case of a writer who is almost our contemporary, this analytical method is too easy to be of much importance, for there is an obvious and necessary correspondence between his work and his world; the man and his *milieu* are both well known to us; the characteristics are those of his class and his nation; we have only to put together causes and effects that show manifestly the correlation between the environment and its product. Among the signs of his time may be noticed, in particular, the influence on his poetry of the scientific spirit, the growth of accurate habits of observation, the demand for exactitude in details, for minute delineation of accessories, for a patient study of small things; the spirit, in fact, which has affected art and literature in the form of what is now called realism. No poet has been more solicitous than Tennyson about precision in his land-

scape painting, or more carefully correct in his allusions to animals and plants; and in most instances the precision of fact strengthens the ornamental form, like a solid building architecturally decorated. Burke, in his treatise on the Sublime and Beautiful, observes that "there are reasons in nature why the obscure idea, when properly conveyed, should be more affecting in poetry than the clear"; but in Tennyson's verse the exactitude has in no way detracted from its beauty. And his metaphors are much more than figures of style; they very often do really intensify a vivid sensation. Yet the scientific impulse carries him too far when experimental physics are made to furnish a metaphor for unbearable emotion —

"Break, thou deep vase of chilling tears,
That grief has shaken into frost."

We have to understand that at a certain low temperature water, if shaken, will expand into ice and break the vessel that contains it; and so a heart that is benumbed with grief will be rent if it is agitated by a too painful recollection. We may admire the technical skill that has compressed all this into two short lines; but the metaphor is too ingenious, and the effort of seizing the analogy undoubtedly checks our sensibility to the poet's distress. He is much more in his true poetical element when he returns to the contemplation of the mystery that no scientific research can penetrate or unravel, when he plucks the flower in the crannied wall —

"If I could understand
What you are, root and all,
I should know what God and man is."

“Toute l’immensité traverse l’humble fleur du penseur contemplée,” says Victor Hugo; the microscope and telescope, the vast prospects and retrospects thrown open to us by Science, still leave the world no less an unintelligible enigma than before. Between mythology and science, between the capricious elemental divinities and the conception of fixed mechanical laws, we travel from the earliest to the latest stages of man’s perpetual endeavour to decipher the secrets of nature. The myths have always lent themselves to poetry, which indeed may be said to have created them; and Tennyson has given new form and moral significance to some of the ancient fables. But his imaginative faculty was also applied to the metaphysical problems which lie beyond the range of discovery; and he has treated the laws of nature as the index and intimations of the infinite Power that moves somewhere behind them. Whatever may be said of him as a philosopher, it may be granted that in this region of ideas he has produced some splendid poetry, and has illustrated the questioning spirit of his age. In the latest poems his dismay at the pettiness of man’s part and place in the cosmic evolution, at the vision of a godless ocean sapping and swallowing up all definite beliefs, seems to have gradually quieted down into the conviction that a higher and purified existence surely awaits us. Such short pieces as *Doubt and Prayer*, *Faith*, *The Silent Voices*, and others in the small volume of 1892, are passing Thoughts versified, like the Gnostic sentences in prose of Pascal or Joubert. Their tone is generally hopeful and devout; and the *Silent Voices* of the dead call him

“Forward to the starry track,
Glimmering up the height beyond me,
On, and always on.”

In Wordsworth's famous Ode the celestial light is behind us, and slowly fades into the light of common day —

“Whither has fled the visionary gleam?”

We look back at “the immortal sea which brought us hither.” In Tennyson's poem of Merlin and the Gleam the light is in front of us across the great water—

“There on the border
Of boundless Ocean,
And all but in Heaven
Hovers the Gleam.”

If, again, we descend from these spheres of lofty speculation, and turn to the positive and practical aspects of Tennyson's poetry, we may allow that it undoubtedly represents the ideas and tastes, the inherited predilections, the prevailing currents of thought, of Englishmen belonging to his class and his generation. Moderation in politics, refined culture, religious liberalism chequered by doubt, a lively interest in the advance of scientific discovery coupled with alarm lest it might lead us astray, attachment to ancient institutions, larger views of the duty of the State towards its people, and increasing sympathy with poverty and distress—all these feelings and tendencies find their expression in Tennyson's poems, and will be recognised as the salient features of the national character. In the direction of political ideals his imaginative faculty enabled him sometimes not

only to discern the movement, but also to lead the way. The imperial conception—realising the British empire's unity in multiplicity, regarding it as a deep-rooted tree which sustains and nourishes its flourishing branches, while the branches in return give support and vitality to the stem—was proclaimed in his verse before it had attained its present conspicuous popularity. He saw that the edifice had been quietly set up by builders who made no noise over their work; and he called upon all English-speaking folk to join hands and consolidate it. The revival and spread of profound veneration for the Throne, as the common centre and head of a scattered dominion, is another outcome of the same idea that owes its development to the last thirty years of Queen Victoria's reign; and some share in promoting it may fairly be attributed to the Laureate's stately verse. In all these respects, therefore, it will be right for the future historian to treat Tennyson as a representative of the Victorian period, and to draw inferences from his work as to the general intellectual and political tendencies of the nineteenth century. Yet a single writer can at most only present particular aspects of a general view, coloured and magnified in poetry for the purposes of his art, and refracted through the medium of his own individuality, which is always strong in men of great genius, who are apt to survey their world from different standpoints, and often to take opposite sides, as in the instance of Byron and Scott. It could therefore be of little advantage to enlarge further upon this theory in a biography.

In the domain of pure literature it is less difficult to measure Tennyson's influence, and to define his

position, so far as one may venture upon doing so within a few years of his death. One can perceive, looking backward, that his genius flowered in due season; there had been a plentiful harvest of verse in the preceding generation, but it had been garnered, and the ground was clear. About this time English poetry had relapsed into one of those intervals of depression that precede a fresh rise; the popular taste was artificial and decadent, running down to the pseudo-romantic and conventional forms, to a false note of sentiment and to affectation in style.' The hour had come for the man who could take up the bequest of that brilliant and illustrious group who, in the first quarter of the century, raised English poetry to a height far above the classic elegance of the eighteenth century, and beyond the domestic, nature-loving, verse of Cowper and Crabbe. A new impulse was needed to lift it, and to break in upon the dulness that seems just then to have settled down, like a passing cloud, upon every form of art. This flat and open space gave Tennyson a fair start upon the course, and favoured the recognition of his superiority; although his general popularity must have spread gradually, since we have seen that even in 1850, when the choice of a new Laureate had to be made, his claim was not admitted without deliberation in high political quarters. Yet all genuine judges had already found in Tennyson the poet who could revive again the imaginative power of verse, who possessed the spell that endows with beauty and artistic precision the incidents and impressions which a weaker hand can only reproduce in vague outline, or tamely; while the master is both luminous and accurate. His first welcome was

in the acclamation of his contemporaries; and herein lay the promise of his poetry, for to the departing generation the coming man has little to say. During Tennyson's youth the whole complexion and "moving circumstance" of the age had undergone a great alteration. It was the uproar and martial clang, the drums and trampling of the long war against France, the mortal strife between revolutionary and reactionary forces, that kindled the fiery indignation of Shelley and Byron, and affected Coleridge and even Wordsworth, "in their hot youth, when George the Third was king." Tennyson's opportunity arrived when these thunderous echoes had died away, when the Reform Bill had become law, and when the era of peace in Europe and comfortable prosperity in England, that marks the middle of the nineteenth century, had just set in. This change in the temper of the times is reflected in his poetry; the wild and stormy element has disappeared; his impressions of the earth, sea, and sky are mainly peaceful, melancholy, mysterious; he is looking on the happy autumn fields, or listening in fancy to the ripple of the brook, or the plash of a quiet sea.

Length of life, maturity of experience, abundant leisure, and domestic happiness must also be reckoned among the tranquillising influences that have imparted the charms of equanimity, self-restraint, and exquisite finish to the best of Tennyson's poetry.

In 1890 Oliver Wendell Holmes, who was Tennyson's junior by only twenty-three days, wrote to him:—

"I am proud of my birth year, and humbled when I think of who were and who are my coevals. Darwin, the destroyer and creator; Lord Houghton, the pleasant and

kind-hearted lover of men of letters ; Gladstone, whom I leave it to you to characterise, but whose vast range of intellectual powers few will question ; Mendelssohn, whose music still rings in our ears ; and the Laureate, whose 'jewels five words long'—many of them a good deal longer—sparkle in our memories."¹

This is a brilliant constellation of talents to have shot up out of a single year (1809) ; and the lives of all these men, except Mendelssohn, were long ; they had full scope for their various capacities. But among Tennyson's precursors in the poetic arena three leaders had died young in the foremost ranks, Byron, Shelley, and Keats : two of them in the midst of feverish activity, they were all cut off suddenly and prematurely. The sum-total of their years added together exceeds by no more than eleven the number that were allotted to Tennyson's account. And if the productive period of a poet's life may be taken to begin at twenty-one (which is full early), it sums up to about thirty-one years for all these three poets, and to above sixty years for Tennyson alone. By the time that Coleridge was twenty-six he had produced (we are told²) all the poetry by which he will be remembered, and critics have declared that Wordsworth did all his good work in the decade between 1798 and 1808. It was Tennyson's good fortune not only to reach a greater age than any other poet of his century, but also to sustain the excellence of his verse for a longer period. Wordsworth, indeed, lived and wrote up to old age ; and in him, as in Tennyson, we have the contemplative humour, the balance of mind swaying occasionally

¹ *Memoir.*

² *Coleridge*, by H. D. Traill ("Men of Letters" series).

between cheerfulness and dejection, that is natural to men who are passing quietly through all the stages of life. Nor should we forget that each of them was most fortunate in the affection of his family and in a well-ordered home; while Byron and Shelley were incessantly at war with society, and Coleridge's matrimonial venture brought him nothing but vexation and embarrassment.

Tennyson's face and demeanour, which have been preserved in the fine portraits of him by Watts and Millais, were so remarkable, that at the first sight one took the impression of unusual dignity and intellectual distinction. His voice, gesture, and bearing impersonated, so to speak, his character and reputation; his appearance fulfilled the common expectation (so often disappointed) of perceiving at once something singular and striking in the presence of a celebrity. Jowett wrote of him after his death that he was a magnificent man who stood before you in his native refinement and strength, and that the unconventionality of his manners was in keeping with the originality of his figure. He enjoyed his well-earned fame and the tokens of enthusiastic admiration that came to him from near and far; he listened to applause with straightforward complacency. From the sensitiveness to which the race of poets is proverbially liable he was not free; and there are passages in his poetry which indicate a shrinking anticipation of the inquest that is now held over a notable man immediately after his death, to scrutinise his private life, and to satiate public curiosity. Under the title of *The Dead Prophet* he published (1885) verses that express this feeling by the rather ghastly image of a great teacher of the

people "whose word had won him a noble name," left stripped and naked after his death before a staring crowd, his corpse laid bare by his friends, and insulted by those whom the Prophet had offended. This poem was written, as the *Memoir* tells us, because Tennyson felt strongly that the world likes to know about the "roughness, eccentricities, and defects of a man of genius, rather than what he really is." It is a very natural popular craving to desire minute knowledge of everything that completes a full-length portrait and re-creates the living bodily presence of a famous man who has passed away; nor would any man of his eminence in our time be more likely to gain than to lose by such a scrutiny than Tennyson. But in the *Recollections* contributed to the *Memoir* by some distinguished men who were qualified to speak of him by long friendship and close personal intercourse, we have ample descriptions of his private life, his way of thought, his conversation, and the various sides of his character. We know already what he really was; we are aware of his susceptibilities; and by respecting them with the deference which they would command if Tennyson were still alive, we shall best honour the memory of an illustrious Englishman and a true and noble poet.

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